



STEEP PATHS

By

Vakhtang Ananyan

A ferocious wild cat killed the cubs of a she-bear that had grown up in the house of a man. The bereaved mother avenged the death of her little ones with the help of her former master. In another story we read of a different case of revenge—a man is made to pay dearly for betraying his wild friend.

Vakhtang Ananyan, the author of these stories, was born in 1905 in one of the most picturesque parts of Armenia. He grew up in a small village lost among the mountain forests. As a boy he came to know and love Nature. Greedily he absorbed the songs of blind ashugs (wandering minstrels) and the stories of fearless hunters, who braved a bear single-handed, and armed with nothing better than clubs beat off wolves which attacked sheep herds.

Ananyan writes about the mountain life he knows so well, about the animals that were companions of his childhood, about his hunting experiences in older years and about the happenings of the distant past which he heard about from old people.

In some of his stories reality is richly embellished with intricate fancy, with beautiful invention, and all of them are permeated with the poetry of the steep mountain paths.

Ananyan wrote his first book—*In a Fiery Ring*—in 1931. Since then he has published several books of stories, one of which was made into a film. His adventure stories are equally popular with young people and grown-up readers.



LIBRARY OF SOVIET SHORT STORIES

VAKHTANG ANANYAN

THE STEEP
PATHS



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE

M o s c o w

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN

BY RAISA BOBROVA

EDITED BY R. DIXON

DESIGNED BY A. F. BIEL

CONTENTS

GRANDAD VARTAN	5
THE WHITE LEADER	55
BUCK	78
THE BIG HEART	83
A CRANE ON GUARD	88
THE TROUT	93
OUR CHAMBAR	113
REVENGE	121
THE TRAITOR	146
INSCRIPTION ON THE GRAVE	164

GRANDAD VARTAN

THE SHORT winter day had drawn to an end, the sun had hidden beyond the Karakhach mountain range. The last shots had died away in the gorges of Chatyn-Dag. Tying the legs of the roe we had killed with the strap of the gun, I shouldered it and, cheerful as all hunters are when they have something to show for their pains, we set out downhill to the winter camp of Kharatanots.

A few dug-outs and pens were scattered on the bank of a spring at the foot of a high, brush-grown rocky hill. We meant to spend the night there and to go and try our luck again at dawn, when deer hurry to their pastures.

Dogs greeted us with indignant barking—what did people with guns want in this little corner cut off from the rest of the world?

A broad-shouldered, short-legged man with a wind-beaten face came out of a dug-out and

shouted at the dogs. We bade him good evening, stamped the snow off our boots before entering the dug-out and went in bending our heads in the low doorway.

An old man sat at a blazing fire, making plaited shoes out of long narrow strips of raw hide. He raised his head at our greetings.

"Oh, good evening, a thousand greetings to you, too," he responded and seeing the roe said to the broad-shouldered shepherd: "The lads must be cold after wandering in the mountains. Spread a felt mat before the fire and make some herbs tea—it will warm them up."

I hung the roe on the door-post, took out my hunting knife and asked:

"Well, Grandad, can one roast a good *shashlyk** on your fire?"

"There can be no better fire than this, and no dearer guests either," the old man answered quietly and turning to the shepherd said: "Symon-*jan*,** hey, Symon, kill that brown lamb, will you?"

"But you needn't do that, Grandad," my comrade interrupted. "There's this roe."

* *Shashlyk*—little bits of meat, most often mutton, soaked in vinegar and roasted over coals on a spit.

** *Jan*—dear.

The old man looked at him disapprovingly from under his grey bushy eyebrows.

"I keep to the old ways. And you may keep to yours, when you are at home," he remarked caustically, as he began raking the coals flat for the *shashlyk*.

"What shall we do with the roe then?" I mumbled.

"You take it to town—to show to your girlfriends," the old man cut me short.

There was no choice but to submit. A few minutes later Symon was skinning the brown lamb, while we sat Turkish fashion on the felt mat basking in the pleasant heat of the fire.

Having done justice to the *shashlyk* and drunk some yellowish-green herbs tea with wild honey, we lay on the soft matting and talked about hunters and their adventures.

The old man turned out to be the head shepherd of a nearby collective farm. He was strongly built, with a big aquiline nose, wrinkled forehead and overhanging tangled eyebrows. It was hard to say how old he was, but his white eyebrows and a few long white hairs that grew on his bare cheeks and on his nose bespoke his great age; as far as we could judge he must have met the turn of the century in the prime of life. I wondered what was

it he reminded me of—an old eagle with drooping wings or an ancient oak-tree, bent under the weight of years?

Grandad Vartan—that was his name—picked up my gun that stood against the wall. Carefully he examined the weapon that glinted in the reddish glow of the fire, pensively stroking its polished parts with his rugged thumb.

"A lovely thing," he said finally. "It's a pity it doesn't play fair, though."

The old man was silent with his thoughts for a while. I could feel that the sight of my gun brought back a host of memories. At last he turned to me.

"I suppose you think you're a hero?"

"If I wasn't, would this roe be here?" I said boastfully, hoping thus to draw the old man out.

He frowned at me and tapped the gun with his finger.

"This is the hero. You must thank your gun for raising a milksop like you in the eyes of the girls."

We laughed at his sally.

"We were the heroes, if anybody was," Grandad Vartan went on. "We entered a bear's den with nothing but a dagger. But who would call hunters heroes these days?"

He heaved a deep sigh.

"It was the end of valour, of heroism when this accursed thing was invented. Have you heard of Ker-ogly? Turkish beks and Persian khans hid in holes at the sight of his sword. When he galloped on his stallion at the head of his seven hundred and seventy-seven dauntless stalwarts, the earth trembled under their horses' hoofs and those who did not know it was them used to say: 'There's an avalanche coming from the mountains.' That's what Ker-ogly was like. And yet such a man was felled by this diabolical gadget. The one who invented it deserves a dog's end.

"When this thing became known, Ker-ogly gathered his braves, smashed his sword against a rock and said: 'The age of valour is past, my men. You can go home, and I have nothing more to live for, if any cowardly piece of dirt hiding round a corner can strike down a hero, whose life is more precious than the world itself.' "

The old man broke off. He was in great agitation.

He took a glowing piece of coal out of the fire, put it into his veteran pipe and drew in deeply several times.

"Valour alone is not enough," he went on

thoughtfully, as if talking to himself. "You must also have a sense of justice and a heart as big as the Chatyn-Dag and as deep as the Lori gorge."

"You keep talking about valour, Grandad," I egged him on. "Tell us something about your own deeds of valour."

"What do you want me to tell you? I can count as many daring feats as there are hairs on my head, and I have done no little good to my kin and to strangers alike, to people I knew and to people I didn't. Even the Azerbaijan folk from beyond the Kura found shelter and food in my house. And here I am now, receiving greenhorns like you and listening to their jeering." The old man affected an offended air.

"No, Grandad, why joke about it? Better tell us how you managed without a gun, if we're not good enough for you," I said.

"Tell us, too, why you're so set against the gun. Isn't it a good help to a shepherd?"

The old man shook his head sadly.

"If it wasn't for the gun, the world would be a different place. And my own life might have come out different, too," he said mournfully.

After a pause he began his story.

"What shall I tell you about, greenhorns that you are? I have no doubt that whatever I

say you will look at me and think: 'Could this decrepit old man ever have done all those things?' Curse this old age that has weakened and disabled me. But when a wise man sees an old rotten oak in a forest he knows that it was once a strong powerful tree. I, too, was as sturdy as an oak when I was young, and my arms were as strong as its branches. We were strong and healthy in those times, for we were forever at war with mountains and forests, while you sleep in soft beds and rely on tricky gadgets like this," he pointed at the gun, "and that is why, as I judge with my poor little brain, you are so pale in the face. We had only our arms to rely on and so they became as strong as an ox's neck.

"In those years our Lori was not at all what it is now. There were no roads, no cars, no large villages. The people were few and the forests and gorges many. In those gorges there was game in plenty.

"How could we get hold of a gun then? It was seldom that one saw a flint-lock in our parts, and then only in the hands of a forest overseer or a village elder. That was why there was so much game. The kids would go to pick some wild pears in the wood and after a while we would hear them screaming at

the sight of a bear. The girls would go to fetch water—and they'd hardly be gone when back they would come running like mad, without their jugs, waving their arms frantically to show there was a lynx lying in wait by the spring. The gorges of the Chatyn-Dag abounded in goats, and the brush at its foot teemed with roes. Herds of deer, a hundred or a hundred and fifty strong, like our collective farm herds of today, grazed in the soft mountain meadows. When autumn came the deer began to groan and sigh calling for their sweethearts. They roared so loud we couldn't sleep at night. Wild animals were so plentiful that there was not enough room for them in the forests.

"I remember a roe once blundering into our village. Dogs and children chased after it, but the sly thing just leaped from one roof to another, until it reached our churchyard and hid in St. Sarkis's chapel. That had to happen just during St. Sarkis's fast. When the roe dashed into the chapel, we all stood stock-still, as if turned to stone. The children ceased shouting, the dogs did not bark.

" 'Hey, villagers,' Khalat, a hunter, cried, 'let the roe be. It's a sacrifice to St. Sarkis!'

"We were dumb and ignorant in those days, so we believed him.

"Another time—it was late autumn, when the harvesting was over—I thrust an axe in my belt and went up to the wood to cut some spokes for a cart. There's a high cliff there with a track right on the edge of a precipice. As I was climbing up along that track I heard somebody coming in front of me. Cold sweat stood out on my forehead.

" 'I'm in for it,' I thought. 'It must be the overseer. He'll take my axe away and fine me into the bargain.'

"I pulled out my axe to hide it under some fallen branches, when whom should I see but a big stag coming straight towards me. It took me quite unawares. I raised my axe and yelled 'Hey-ey-ey!' and the poor beast was so startled by the noise that it leaped aside and fell down the cliff. I went back to the village, got some donkeys and brought the stag home. For two days the whole village feasted on deer *shashlyk*.

"Yes, my dear boys, there were swarms of game, not like today when ten people shoot at a single miserable quail. And how can you expect to find a lot of game? Take the townsfolk from Allaverdy for example: they have been going after the hares so hard that the simple

little things have had to learn guile until they can now outwit many a man.

"Well, I'll now begin my story. One winter we shepherded in Kharatanots winter pastures, and there was no end of bears about. There was plenty of blackberries, nuts, pears, and apples in the woods that year and the bears ate themselves fat and glossy. Not a single day passed without a bear killing a sheep or a cow. It would sling the sheep across its back and waddle unhurriedly away. We had no guns with us, not even a flint-lock, and the bears feared neither man nor dog.

"My father had been to Tiflis that year to buy some things for my brother's wedding and brought back with him a long rusty iron pipe. I don't know what he wanted it for. Our smith Mukuch—God rest his soul—he was clever with his hands. He bent one end of the pipe and clinched it, drilled an opening for the flint, made a stock of a piece of wood—and there was a gun of a sort. I filled the barrel with powder, put in a handful of small shot mixed with little pieces of iron and lay in wait in the scrub on the edge of the pear-wood—over there at the foot of the hill. After a while I heard a huge beast approach me crushing the bushes on its way. It came out and stood

listening for some overripe pear to drop down. A huge he-bear it was. I saw a mark on his forehead either from a club, or a bullet—couldn't make out what. He came quite close to me—another few steps and he'd be making mincemeat of me.

"I aimed my mock gun and pressed the trigger. The damned thing blazed like an old Turkish cannon and flew into pieces. The bushes were all wrapped in smoke, so that I couldn't see anything, but I could hear the bear roaring quite close to me and ran away as fast as my legs would carry me.

"Well, I escaped from the bear all right, but there was more trouble in the evening. When the herd came home I saw that Oganes Tavadants's cow Jeiran was missing. And it had been specially trusted to me. Whatever happened to it—whether it was killed by a wolf or rolled down the slope and broke its leg—it was my responsibility.

"So my elder brother Arut and I went to look for the cow. We searched till it was very late, but there was no sign of it. All of a sudden I saw tracks on the ground—it looked as if something heavy had been dragged through the bushes down into the gorge. In the light of the moon we made out some traces of blood

on the grass and could smell it as well. We followed these tracks down and finally came to a queer sort of hillock—a huge heap of stones, branches, and bits of wood.

“‘What is it, Arut?’ I asked.

“‘That’s a bear’s work,’ he answered and began to dig into this heap, flinging aside the stones and tree-stumps.

“‘What are you doing that for?’ I asked. ‘Let’s go and look for the cow.’

“‘What’s the matter with you?’ Arut asked me in reply. ‘Are you silly, or what?’

“I did not understand what he meant, but I dared not ask again—in those times we never thought of arguing with an elder brother. I took off my coat and started helping him.

“The heap grew smaller until we could see a cow’s head. Jeiran! I saw it all in a flash. The bear had killed the cow and buried her to have a treat later when the meat went bad.

“When I saw Jeiran, blood rushed to my head. It was hard enough to have to pay for the cow, but it was harder still because my heart yearned after Oganess Tavadyants’s daughter. That cursed bear! How could I face the Tavadyants now!

“We skinned the cow and saw that it was very fat.

“‘It’s a pity to throw all this meat away,’ Arut said. ‘Let’s take it with us and make some *khaurma*.’* ”

“We cut the meat into pieces and hung them on a tree, as high as we could reach, so that wolves and foxes could not get at it. Then we folded the hide and carried it home.

“The next morning we came back with some donkeys. But the meat was gone. Who could’ve taken it away? We looked around. There had been no people there, and wolves and foxes can’t climb trees. Hey, what’s this? The heap it had taken us so much work to scatter was back in its place. We cast the stones and tree-stumps aside again and found the meat buried underneath. But of course! Didn’t our father, God bless his soul, always tell us bears could climb trees!

“We were packing the meat on the donkeys when we heard a heavy tread—some beast was coming towards us across the clearing. Then we saw a huge head peer from behind a big tree-stump. It bore the familiar mark on the forehead—it was my acquaintance of yesterday.

**Khaurma* is fried meat, preserved in fat, and kept in jars for the winter.

"On seeing us, the bear turned round and walked off with a growl. That's the way with bears—if you don't touch them, they will never molest you, they'll even go away from a child.

"'Arut,' I said. 'It's him that killed Jeiran. How can we get even with him?'

"'You just wait till the snow falls and he goes to sleep for the winter—then it'll be easy.'

"Before shambling away the bear looked at me sort of spitefully, as if to say:

"'So you've got hold of my catch you thieving man. All right, I'll not forget it, or that time you shot at me, either.'

"And so war began between us. From then on that bear and I were always after each other's blood, always trying to worst each other. The hostilities went on for about two years. I'll tell you how it all ended when we've eaten these potatoes."

With these words Grandād Vartan poked with his stick in the hot ashes of the fire-place. The potatoes buried under the coals hissed and spurted the ashes off—that meant they were cooked.

The old man threw a mocking glance at my comrade, who was blowing on his fingers

which he had scalded trying to skin a hot potato, and remarked sarcastically:

"That's not the way to eat a potato, my lad—you're just spoiling it."

"But surely I can't eat all this ash—it's not good for my stomach," said my companion, who was not used to rough food.

The old man laughed.

"Stomach, indeed! We never heard of stomachs before. It was you who invented the thing and that's why you're so pale, I suppose," he said, and picking up a hot potato calmly rubbed it on his rough trousers.

The soot and ashes came off leaving a pink potato with an attractive crisp crust.

Grandad Vartan ate it with relish: potatoes are a favorite dish with the people of Lori.

"No good will come of work your heart isn't in, no nourishment is in food you eat without pleasure," the old man said sententiously. "Take me, for instance. I've lived for a hundred years and I can still thread a needle—that's an old man's eyes for you. Because I never took any notice of the ashes, or of my stomach either, but enjoyed whatever food came my way. That is why I could lift a fully

loaded cart with my shoulder when I was young.

"Yes, my lads, those who pick and choose their food, will never be able to live in a forest or in the mountains. They will have an attack of stomach all right."

We were never able to find out what the old man meant by a "stomach"—very likely he thought it was some kind of disease.

After the supper the old man resumed his story:

"Well, I was telling about my war with that accursed bear. There was but one thought nagging at my heart day and night—how to get at that bear and show Tavadyant's daughter what I was capable of. Perhaps her heart would warm towards me then.

"For full four years, or perhaps even five, I had been cherishing secret love for her, pining away and composing mournful songs. I made myself a pipe and would play it and sing my songs. Sometimes I would make up my mind to go to her, take her by the hand, and pour my heart out in tears. But the moment I saw her from afar, going to the spring with a jar on her shoulder, cold sweat would break out on my brow, my ears would buzz, my resolution would fail me and I would run away

into the forest to sing my *bayati** all by myself. Love was torturing me and driving me silly. I knew neither rest nor sleep.

"Meanwhile my sweetheart blossomed out like a young apple-tree. And as the rosy petals of the apple blossom attract swarms of bees, who come to collect sweet nectar for their delicious honey, so my beloved attracted young men from the whole village. Her legs were as slim as a deer's, her waist was as slender as a box-tree, her eyes were as black as jet, and she carried her pretty head as proudly as a queen. She did not care a hoot for anybody at all.

"And how she danced at the village weddings, this haughty lass. Our lads went crazy over her, and would turn their pockets inside out and give the pipers all the money they had only to win a kind smile from her. But all was of no avail. She hadn't as much as a look for them: you would have thought she was, indeed, the queen of these mountains. That is why I never dared to approach her.

"One evening I sat by the fire in front of the cave where we used to pen our sheep in for the night. The sheep were munching their hay or

**Bayati*—popular songs, on various themes, but sung to the same tune.

dozing, the tired shepherds were long asleep, but I could not sleep and was playing my pipe, its sad song floating over the mountains and meadows which seemed to be sobbing with me, sharing my great love and sorrow. The dogs lay with their heads on their forepaws, their eyes fixed on me. They were my brothers in my grief, they knew what ailed me.

"Late into the night, when the whole camp was fast asleep, a girl came out of Tavadants's tent, dressed all in white, and it was as if a moon showed up and lit the dark gorges. She sat down on a stone by their tent and listened to my pipe. It was she, the piece of my heart, my life, my goddess. As I saw her, I burst out into a song that would have melted a stone, to say nothing of a human heart. She sat listening, but here, as if to spite me, the dogs started barking, and woke up the whole camp—a wolf had got into a sheep-pen. They frightened my peri, and she went inside, taking my heart with her.

"After that I followed her about like a forest sprite all through the summer and autumn, trying to get her by herself, but she never was alone. One day—it was after the bear had killed the cow—I asked the boys to look after my sheep and went into the wood. I thought

she might be there gathering beech-nuts with the girls.

"All our women and girls used to gather wild nuts in the forest to lay in store for the winter. On winter evenings they would sit in front of the fire-place, eating the nuts and listening to fairy-tales. But this time my darling wasn't among them.

"So I went to the village, hiding and peeping out from behind the trees like a fox.

"Suddenly I saw her come out of her house, leading her little brother by the hand. They started out for the wood. My heart thumped like mad. I followed them hiding in the bushes, crouching down, crawling on all fours just like a wolf pursuing a lamb.

"She stopped under a large beech and shouted joyfully, 'Look, what a lot of nuts! Run back home, Vagan-jan, and bring a sack or something!'

"The boy ran away, and I stole nearer, and stood behind the large beech with bated breath feasting my eyes on her.

"The girl sat down and began playing with twigs and leaves like a child, pinning motley-coloured leaves to her breast instead of a rose and amusing herself as best she could (you just watch somebody secretly when he's alone

—it's the funniest thing you can imagine!). She started and looked round at every sound.

"I stood there wondering how to approach my timid roe so that her little heart should not burst with fright, so that the precious bird should not flit out of my hands.

"So I stared at her, as if spellbound and all but turned to stone, going hot one moment and so cold the next, that my teeth clattered as if I had been sitting on a block of ice out in the frost on a January night with nothing but my shirt on.

"At last I could bear it no longer. Well, I thought, come what may. I ran out from my ambush, staggering like a drunken man and cried out: 'Vartanush-*jan*, my love, don't be afraid of me. I'd rather have my arm wither than touch a hair on your head.'

"She jumped up and darted aside like a lamb from a wolf. Her tongue failed her and she just waved her arms at me.

"I don't remember what happened afterwards except that I fell on my knees before her and began to bow down to her as if I were before St. Sarkis's chapel. I took off my cap, and implored and wept and did all sorts of wild things, as if I were beside myself and did

not know what I was doing. I remember I kept repeating:

“Vartanush-*jan*, you aren’t made of stone, are you? I’ve loved you for five years and pined for you—haven’t you any pity at all, don’t you hear how I sing at nights, what songs I compose in your honour? Can’t you give me a kind glance at least, you heartless wench?”

“As I was saying all this, tears streamed down my face. Don’t you think I’m exaggerating. If I had my legs cut off at that moment, I would not so much as have cried out. So I sobbed before her, pleading:

“Just one kind word, Vartanush-*jan*, give me a ray of hope to set my aching heart at peace, otherwise—God is my witness!—I’ll thrust a dagger in my heart. My blood will give you no rest.’

“However hard I was saying to myself that I must keep at a distance, I couldn’t help moving nearer to her. I wanted to kiss her foot with prayer, as we kiss the stone cross of St. Sarkis. All this while she just stared at me, unable to utter a single word.

“When I stretched out my arms, Vartanush made to run away, but I stood in her way and caught her by the elbow. She turned pale, gave

a cry, and snatched a tiny dagger from under her apron.

" 'Let me go, or I'll stab you!' she shouted.

I smiled.

" 'Do, my love,' I said, 'please do, Vartanush-*jan*. How happy I shall be if you wound me so that I should have some mark to remember you by.'

"In those times a girl would sooner have shed a man's blood than let him hold her by the arm. Vartanush tried to pull her arm free, but my grip was firm, and so she struck with her dagger and cut my thumb. I merely laughed, but my darling gasped when she saw the blood spurt and her eyes became as kind as those of a loving sister.

" 'Oh, what have I done, foolish thing that I am,' she lamented. 'Oh, I'd rather have my eyes go blind and my arm wither!'

"She bandaged my thumb, weeping.

"I was so happy tears welled up in my eyes anew. I wept again and then calmed down. So the stormy sky dissolves in a shower and then calms down.

"I sank on to my knees, raised my arms up to the sky, and broke into a prayer of thanksgiving.

" 'Glory to you, blue sky, for sending me

this great happiness. If you treasure the light of your moon, if you treasure the stars—those priceless diamonds that beautify your breast, if you treasure your undying sun, don't leave my dream unfulfilled, I implore you, blue sky.'

"As I prayed, the girl wept softly—weeping the heaviness off her heart.

"I rose to my feet, pacified, and said:

" 'All right, Vartanush, go home now. I am content. Even if the whole world rises against me, it will not take you away from me.'

"With these words I went away walking with my head in the clouds. It seemed to me that the trees rustling in the wind were whispering among themselves about my love, that the autumn leaves floating down to the ground were dancing at our betrothal, and that the wild pigeons cooing in the tree-tops were singing glory to my great love. I talked to every bush, to every rock, to my beloved mountains, telling them of my Vartanush, so that they, too, should know that Vartanush loved me. I walked on and on, not knowing where I was going, and my song rang through the hills.

"Only when the sun was setting, did I look round, and recognize the Akhpara Mountains. Down below were Lori, Borchalu, the Tiflis region stretching away, and farther off the Ku-

ra River fringed by two yellow borders of reed.

"Yes, my lads, ignorant shepherds though we were, we could give our whole hearts in love," Grandad Vartan said with emotion and began filling his pipe.

These recollections had kindled a spark in his dimmed eyes—for the last time, perhaps. For a while the old man sat in silence, absorbed in his thoughts, seemingly forgetful of our presence. I watched him, marvelling that an illiterate man could speak so beautifully. At last Grandad Vartan emerged from his reverie and resumed his story.

"The next day I asked my mother to talk my father into going to Oganesh and asking him to give me his daughter in marriage.

"Mother gasped:

"'Oh, Vartan-jan, bless my soul, Oganesh will never give us his daughter!'

"'I must have Vartanush, Mother,' I said, 'or I'll go and throw myself over Crow's Cliff.'

"Poor Mother was so frightened by my threat that she talked to my father that very evening and persuaded him to go to Oganesh. Loath as he was to do it, Father went off the next evening.

" 'He could not even take proper care of my cow,' Oganès said to him acridly, 'how can I trust him with my daughter?'

" 'Our boy is going all to pieces,' Father pleaded. 'Don't kill his dreams, brother Oganès.'

"Oganès was a rich man, known all over the district. He was stubborn as a mule, but he took pride in being as good as his word. He'd made a rash promise on the spur of the moment, but he'd keep it all the same, not to have people say that he did not stand by his word. He was as boastful as he was rich.

"They drank a few bottles together that evening. Flushed with wine Oganès said to my father:

" 'Now, Chobanats Matsak, you know well enough that I'm the sort of man who eats at the same table with the police-officer and the village elder, while your son hasn't got a penny to cross himself with. Let him at least perform some feat so that I can call him a hero—then he'll be worthy of my daughter.'

" 'But what must he do for you to call him a hero?' asked my father.

" 'Well, let him kill that bear with a *dagger*, for instance. Here I'm telling you before witnesses: the day your son kills the bear

with the mark on his forehead, provided he does it with a *dagger*, I'll allow him to pluck the rose in my garden.'

"And so, they struck a bargain there and then. We did not know then that Tavadyants was making me risk my life just for his own fun, and when the village learned of our agreement there were many who envied me.

"So I took Grandfather's huge dagger and went rambling in the forest. What did I care for the sheep, and food, or the world itself! Day and night I could see Vartanush, tears in her lovely eyes. I was tortured with the thought: 'How will it all end? Will I lay the bear's skin at Vartanush's feet or will he overpower me and bury my remains under tree-stumps and stones as he did with the cow?'

"Those were my thoughts as I climbed Bear's Rock.

"Winter had come, a thin sheet of snow had covered the rocks and bushes. I knew that the bear with the mark had retired for the winter somewhere not far away.

"My brother Arut and brother-in-law Artem accompanied me with a flint-lock.

"At last we climbed the rock. On the steep slope I could see two dark holes—bear lairs.

"Arut and Artem did not go higher but I scrambled up to the holes, cutting my arm on a rock, and crawled into the cave clutching my dagger. The bear was there all right, but as it happened, he had not fallen asleep yet, damn the brute. No sooner had I put my foot inside, than he rushed at me, knocked me out of the way with a blow of his paw, and ran out with a roar.

"I reeled, clutched at a hazel bush with one hand, and tried to plunge my dagger into the bear with the other. But the bear grabbed at me from behind with his sharp-clawed paw and gave me such a shake that I nearly pitched down the precipice.

"Luckily for me my clothes were so ragged and worn out with sleeping on damp grass and walking under scorching sun, that they had torn easily, and the bear, a piece of cloth in his claws, lost his balance and tumbled down. I heard the report of Artem's flint-lock, but he missed: the bear showed us a clean pair of heels and disappeared in the gorge.

"Arut and Artem looked at me and nearly split their sides with laughter. What do you think? This damned beast had torn off a huge piece out of the seat of my pants and I stood

there with my behind bare for everyone to see and laugh at.

"It was a disgraceful home-coming. The whole village learned about my misfortune and made fun of me. They even gave me a nickname—Vartan Bare Bottom.

"But what made me see red was that hum-bug Tavadyants sending me a pair of home-spun woollen trousers with a message: 'Take these, dear son-in-law, and cover your arse before coming to ask for my daughter's hand.' He was having his laugh at my expense, and there was nothing I could do about it. His words burned my inside like the bitterest poison—if I had eaten a ton of honey, it would not have sweetened the taste. They cut like a dagger thrust in my heart.

"But all that was nothing compared to the worry that tortured me when I thought what Vartanush would say, how I could ever dare to face her. They jeered at her too, driving her to tears sometimes. Her sisters-in-law never stopped teasing her. Whenever they asked her to do something they'd be sure to add, 'Please, Vartanush, do this for the sake of that bare-bottom fiancé of yours.'

"They went on like this all through the win-

ter so that I didn't dare to show my face in the village for shame.

"In the day-time I roamed in the woods looking for the bear and when darkness fell I stole into the winter camp and fell asleep in a shed.

"Spring came. The woods and the gorges wrapped themselves in fresh green, my beloved mountains put on bright motley-coloured frocks.

"For days on end I would sit, like one spell-bound, on a rock, oblivious of everything, admiring the beauty of the Lori gorge and listening to the melodious babbling of the water in the Debedchai. But the old pain would gnaw at my heart.

" 'Oh, curse this poverty! It's because I'm poor that Tavadyants sent me into this jungle, made me a puppet dancing to his tune, somebody to laugh at and exercise his wit on when drinking with his friends. Is the man made of stone that he wouldn't see the tears of his only daughter, lovely Vartanush? Suppose I don't meet this devil of a beast at all? There are lots of things that can happen to an animal in the forest—he might have croaked long ago for all I know. Will then

my love, my little bird Vartanush, never be mine?’

“At this thought the hair stirred on my head, and a choking lump rose in my throat. At night I would sit by the fire in the sheep’s pen, piping my grief out to the mountains and gorges, to the flowers on the ground and the stars in the sky. And the dogs, my trusted friends, would lay around, gazing at me with their wise eyes and listening to my song, to the cry of my heart. Tears would flow from their eyes too and they would grieve with me, because there was far more humanity and honesty in those dumb animals than in Tavadyants.

“On the Transfiguration Day our lovely girls and young women poured out onto the mountains, that sparkled with their bright flowery dresses and rang with their songs and laughter. *Zournas* played jolly dance melodies. Young fellows wrestled on a soft spacious meadow. Old wives were churning butter; young women skimmed cream from the milk and baked pastries that melted in the mouth; girls ran in the meadow sprinkling water on each other.

“Among them, a scarlet flower in her coral-red dress, was my Vartanush.

"I sat and admired her from afar and my heart glowed with joy one moment and turned dark like a stormy sky the next.

"Suddenly a man on horseback, a gun slung behind his back and silver cartridges adorning his Circassian coat, rode into the meadow. The sounds of *zournas* broke off. People gave way deferentially and calmed the dogs. He dismounted at Tavadyants's tent. Soon Oganes's wife ran out and beckoned her daughter home. Vartanush obeyed with a dejected air.

"People began to whisper, casting glances at me. And then it dawned on me—like a thunderbolt.

"I abandoned the herd, climbed the highest and the sharpest peak nearby and looked down. The gorge was filled with white fog that floated up to my rock and I stood there, all alone, feeling as if I were on an island with the sea all around me. Shall I throw myself into this sea, I wondered. My poor heart will then be at peace. I was like one demented and I flung myself into the milk-white sea.

"When I came to I found myself lying on soft grass and the wind was tearing the fog into stripes and whisking them away.

"I lay there awhile, collecting my wits and

finally told myself, 'Don't lose your head, my boy, wait and see what the future brings you. Perhaps the heavens will smile on you yet.'

"I went back to the camp. There I learned that the rider with a gun was the son of the Dsekh village elder and I was told what my heart had already guessed: Oganēs Tavadants wanted to become related to the elder through marriage.

"I sent my father to Oganēs again.

" 'I gave my word and I shall stand by it,' Oganēs told him. 'Let your son bring me the skin of the bear with the mark and he will have my daughter.'

"Such was his character—he wanted both to show people that he could keep his word, and enjoy the sight of my torture.

"In the evening my cousin arranged for me to meet Vartanush. We met behind a large rock near their tent. The moon shone brightly. Vartanush walked round me and looked at my back.

" 'What is it, Vartanush-*jan*?' I asked her.

" 'Nothing,' she answered laughing. 'I wanted to make sure that you've put a patch on your pants.'

"She was joking, of course, but her words tore into my heart like a bullet.

“So you are making fun of me too, are you, Vartanush? What shall I do then? What rock shall I smash my head against? Your father has bound me hand and foot and has well nigh driven me to distraction. If he were to say to me, “I want the Debedchai to flow into the Delizhan gorge instead of here,” I’d take a shovel and a pick and would hack away at the stone for seven years, sweating day and night. For your sake I should cut a hole in the rock and make the river change its course. If he were to say, “I want a garden planted in place of this forest,” I’d take an axe and for a look from you would toil like a slave for seven years. I would cut down all the trees and in their place plant a garden with flowers and fruit-trees, where you, my love, could take walks. If he were to say to me, “Go and bring me the head of the robber Sadap-ogly Omar,” I’d go and fight Omar. Either I’d be killed myself or I’d kill him and put his head at your feet. But your father has set me a task Satan himself wouldn’t have thought of. A bear is a free beast. Today he’s here—tomorrow he may be in the Akhpat wood. One may only meet him once a year, if at all. Before you’ve got your dagger out, the beast is on the other side of the ridge.

How shall I find him? What abyss shall I hurl myself into?

"As I was thus bewailing my fate, Vartanush gazed at me lovingly, like a sister, and finally said in a soft, tearful voice, 'My poor dear, how thin you've grown, how pale....'

"I must have really grown skinny, what with fatigue and heartache. In those days we never had a chance to see our own mugs. The only mirror in the village was in the priest's house. When Vartanush spoke to me so kindly, with pity in her voice and tears in her eyes, I took heart again as if roses had blossomed out and a nightingale broke into song in my heart. I felt my arms grow strong, my blood rush through my veins, my eyes light up, and my face flush. Ah, it's a great thing to be young. Youth is all-powerful.

"*'Vartanush-jan,'* I said. 'Hold out, do not give your word to the elder's son. I'll go into the deepest forest and try and fulfil your father's condition. You may only consent to marry him when my cousin brings you my blood-covered shirt.' My cousin stood nearby and heard my vow. Then Vartanush and I shook hands and parted.

"I asked my comrades to look after my herd and went off into the forest. For several days

I roamed the thickets, looking for the tracks of my hated enemy, examining crushed twigs of blackberry bushes, trampled grass, and traces on the ground, trying to find him so that I could stick my dagger into him, and push him out of my path to happiness.

"There's a tall moss- and brush-grown mountain in the Akhpat forest. Raspberry and black-currant bushes on the slopes were then hung with heavy ripe berries.

"As I sat on top of this mountain, thinking sad thoughts, I suddenly heard crashing sounds behind. I looked round and saw a huge paw stretch out of the leaves and—just like a man—bend down a black-currant branch towards an enormous hairy mouth. The jaws closed and a big cluster of juicy blackberries was swallowed at one gulp.

"With bated breath I peered through the leaves. There was the familiar head with the white mark on the forehead. My heart raced madly. I crawled among the bushes towards the bear, rushed at him from behind and plunged my dagger under his shoulder-blade. But I chose the wrong spot—my dagger struck against the bone.

"A roar like a peal of thunder split over my head and the next moment I received a stag-

gering blow on the ear. Everything swam before my eyes. I felt I was sliding down, down, and finally pitching head foremost I struck against something and lost consciousness.

"I came to in a damp ravine and hearing the murmur of a spring realized I was still alive. My luck had stood by me, and I had dropped on a heap of old leaves. They had accumulated there, at the foot of the rock, in the course of many years. I touched my face and saw blood on my fingers. I felt my left ear—it had been torn off and hung on a thread. 'Thank God,' I thought, 'I got off easily.'

"When I came home, Mother put me to bed and moaned and wailed over me. She called a leech, who prepared all sorts of potions and ointments and got me well soon.... But my ear would not heal and the leech decided to cut it off altogether. Here I protested. 'Can't you glue it on somehow?' I asked.

"'You have the hole, haven't you, son,' he answered. 'You can hear all right, can't you? That should satisfy you. What d'you want this piece of meat for?' And so he cut it off. He couldn't understand it spoiled my looks and made my face sort of queer.

"I was so miserable that I even cried that

night. 'Why should Vartanush refuse rich handsome chaps to marry a poor shepherd, and one ear short at that?' I thought.

"I sighed and tossed on my bed, while Mother sat by me and muttered, wiping tears with her apron.

" 'May the fire in your house go cold, Oganesh Tavadyants.' Then she turned to me. 'Vartan-*jan*, my life, forget about them. It's not for you, my poor boy, to marry Tavadyants's daughter. We are the laughing-stock of the village as it is.'

"It hurt me more than I can say to hear those words, but I could not help myself. It's a terrible thing, love is—if it's made a nest in a man's heart, neither words, nor tears, nor the point of a dagger can drive it out.

"I was a strong fellow, and was soon quite well again. But my love and grief remained with me."

Part of Grandad Vartan's face was in the shadow as he sat leaning back. Breaking off his story he turned his left cheek towards us, and we saw the reminder the bear left him three-quarters of a century back. Where his ear should have been there was an ugly hair-grown hole with a rugged edge.

"So I got well," the old man went on, "but

Mother took away my dagger so that I shouldn't go chasing the bear again.

"In autumn we returned to our winter camp. In those years we used to go out into the forest in autumn and make wooden tubs, spoons, pitchforks, and threshing-boards. All those we bartered for grain in woodless Shoragaly.

"That autumn, too, I spent several days in our beech-wood hollowing tubs.

"One evening I hid my tubs and axe under some fallen branches and went home. All my thoughts were with Vartanush. That autumn more young men than ever went wooing her and the Dsekh elder was pressing Oganesh for an answer: 'Why won't you say either "yes" or "no"?' The reason why Oganesh kept putting it off was that whenever he brought the question up his daughter would beat her head against the wall and scream that she would not marry the son of the elder for anything on earth.

"But I knew well enough that in the end Oganesh would wave aside his daughter's tears—a girl was not considered a human being in those days.

"I plodded along, my heart heavy with misery. There was a full moon. A night bird was

crying in the rocks piteously, as if mourning my grief. The trees stood bare, and frost lay on fallen leaves.

"Suddenly I saw a huge black beast among the trees. I stopped. Could that be a buffalo? What would a buffalo be doing in the wood at this time of the year?

"The beast waddled straight towards me, grunting.

"A bear, unless it's wounded or bears a grudge, will never attack a man.

" 'Well,' I thought, 'that must be him. He's recognized me, the blighter. I must make myself scarce.'

"I ran and climbed a smooth-barked beech. As I sat perched up there, panting breathlessly, the bear came up and squatted on his haunches at the foot of the tree, snorting and growling.

" 'How shall I drag down this nuisance of a man?' he must have been wondering.

"I looked down and went cold at the sight of this huge beast with burning little eyes. If only I had my dagger with me! Here was my luck walking right into my hands, and me unable to grab it.

"The bear stood on his hind legs, hugged the tree-trunk and started climbing up.

“‘This is the end,’ crossed my mind. I was not sorry to part with this life. My only thought was of my beloved. I took leave of her and kissed her eyes in my last farewell.

“Meanwhile the bear came up and up. I climbed higher, and higher, too, but finally there was no way of retreat left—I had reached the frail branches on the top.

“When I saw I could go no higher I bent down and yelled at the top of my voice:

“‘What do you want from me, you heartless animal? Why must you kill my dreams?’

“The bear raised his head and stared at me, while I clung to my branch saying to myself, ‘Is it really the end, my boy?’

“The unfathomable sky above me, the terrible bear below, what could I do?

“I suddenly remembered stories I had heard from old hunters about bears being afraid of fire. My heart gave a joyous thump. I removed my coat, ripped the lining off and took out my steel, flint, and tinder. Then I waited for the bear. When he saw I had quietened down, he made for me as fast as he could.

“I could feel his hot breath on my feet already. I mustered my strength and struck the flint with the steel. Sparks flew about. The bear shrank back.

"I kept striking the flint, and the bear growled resentfully, but stayed where he was, fearing the sparks.

"At last I smelt the tinder burning and thought gleefully: 'Now I've got you! Just wait and see me burn your ugly mug!'

"I put the smouldering tinder to the lining of my coat and blew hard on it. The flames spurted out right into my face. I hastened to hurl the coat down onto the bear's head.

"The beast rolled down the tree with a terrific howl. He ran aside and sat watching the coat burn, as if waiting for the fire to go out, so that he could then go and devour me without interruption.

"But I did not give him time to collect his wits—I slid down the tree, too, hoisted the coat on the end of a stick and advanced on my enemy, brandishing my weapon. My coat was now blazing like a wedding torch lighting all around. It was a sight fit to frighten the devil himself, and to make it more fearful still I howled, 'Woo-woo-woo!'

"Thus I escaped the claws of that damned beast. When I came home, Mother asked me what had happened to my coat. I told her that I'd left it hanging on a tree at the place I worked on my tubs. I did not tell her a word

about the bear. The poor dear was so afraid of him she kept seeing him in her dreams.

"In the dead of night I got up from my bed, put on my father's coat, got my dagger and ran to the beech-wood.

"I found my store-room in a state of complete havoc. That rotter had discovered it by my smell, scattered the tubs about, and even fouled one of them. It was just like a bear to do that sort of thing.

"I felt the manure—it was still warm. Could he be hiding close by waiting to take revenge on me? No sooner had the thought flashed across my mind than I heard a crashing noise just beside me. I darted aside, mounted a tree-stump, threw off my coat, wrapped it round my left arm, and held my dagger ready in the right one.

"The bear rushed at me with a roar, his huge mouth yawning like a shed-gate. Coming close to me, he rose on his hind legs. I thrust my wrapped left arm deep into his throat, while with my other arm I drove the dagger under his left shoulder-blade and turned it in the wound several times. At last I had him, the beast that had been making hell of my life for two years.

"Finally the dagger reached his heart. He slumped, stopped chewing my arm and dropped down with a groan. I pulled out my dagger, took my left arm out of his mouth, and kicked him. He stretched out and died.

"Yes, my dears, that's valour for you! It isn't like your hiding behind a rock and shooting at some wretched little beastie from a whole mile off. What a thing to show off before the town girls about! To compare with our feats. . . . Look."

He rolled up the sleeve on the left arm. It was all covered with terrible scars—marks of a bear's teeth.

"What happened then?" my comrade asked.

"Then I flayed the bear and carried the skin home, singing on the way about my Vartanush. Blood was streaming down my arm, but I did not even notice it. Oh yes, we were strong chaps in those days. Not like today's sweet-eaters who rush for the doctor if they've got a tiny splinter in their finger!"

We laughed at the gibe. The old man continued his story.

"When Mother saw my arm, she began to cry and wail. 'Why are you crying, Mother,' I asked her. 'My dream's come true. There oughtn't to be a happier woman than you in

the whole world. As for my arm—don't bother about that. There's a dried flower sown into the lining of my fur cap. Take it and put it on my wounds.'

"I had found that marvellous flower in the summer, when I was watching the herd in the mountains. I once came across an old dry bone, lying in the grass; there was a bit of fresh live meat with skin and hair left in one place.

"I was amazed to see this miracle. When I looked closer I saw there was a flower overhanging that spot. It must have been the dew from this flower dropping on the bone every morning that kept the meat from rotting.

"Yes, my lads, there are magic flowers in our mountains that can put life into dead flesh."

We listened with an indulgent smile.

"So Mother put that flower on my mauled arm and the wounds healed."

"But what about Vartanush?" I asked impatiently.

A dark shadow crossed the old man's keen face and his eyes clouded. After a short pause he said with a sigh:

"They did not let me have Vartanush. Oganesh had had his joke. I'd killed the bear, but

by that time it was settled that Vartanush would marry the son of the Dsekh village elder. When she was told, Vartanush tore at her hair and screamed that she would only marry her own sweetheart.

"And then my family thought—it was just like their poor stupid heads—that the best thing to do would be to help to get the girl out of the village while I was laid up with my wounds, to put some distance between us.

"‘Tavadyants will never marry his daughter into our poor family anyway,’ they reasoned.

"So my aunt's daughter—that cousin of mine who knew about our agreement—took my blood-stained shirt to Vartanush, saying:

"‘Say farewell to your hopes, my dear. He breathed his last in the night.’

"My poor Vartanush sobbed and sobbed and finally said: ‘My dream is dead, I don't care what you do with me now. You may kill me if you like, or you may marry me off to the elder's son, or to a dog for that matter—it's all the same to me. My sun has set, and it's the end of everything....’ So they contrived to put a wedding-ring on her finger.

"When I got better I asked my mother:

'Have you sent the bear's skin to Vartanush, *nani*?'*

"She did not say anything, but just started crying.

"I dashed out into the yard and saw the skin drying on the fence. Everything swam before me and I asked my father: 'Why is the skin still here, *api*?'*"

" 'One must cut one's coat according to one's cloth, my boy,' he answered.

"I understood in a flash, and my legs gave way under me. But I did not dare to reproach him—in those days sons were as mute before a father as daughters-in-law.

"I went back to my mother, my heart bursting with grief. '*Nani*, tell me what's the matter? I feel there's something wrong.'

"Mother told me all, crying bitterly.

" 'Don't go out today, dear,' she told me. 'They've come for the girl. Let the elder's son take her away, let their marriage bells toll like a knell, let his mother weep, lamenting this day, as I'm weeping now.'

"I rushed out like one possessed, but they caught me, bound me hand and foot, and locked me up in a shed.

**Nani*—mother.

***Api*—endearment for "father."

"In the evening I heard the sounds of *zournas* and drum. I howled, and sobbed, and beat my head against the wall.

"In the morning they released me. 'She was taken away to Dsekh at dawn,' they said and tried to placate me. 'Forget about her, come to your senses. Is she the only girl in the world?'

"I pretended to give in, though the blood was boiling in my veins, and my heart ached unbearably. I hid my dagger under my coat and told Mother I'd go and water the cattle.

"Mother was relieved. I took the cattle to the river and from there made along the gorge for Dsekh, clutching the dagger in my hand.

"After a while I heard the sounds of *zournas* and drum in the forest. This was the wedding procession slowly moving along the road. I made a short cut and ran out on the road in front of them.

"When Vartanush saw me she screamed, 'Good Lord, Vartan's alive,' and dropped in a dead faint.

"The music broke off.

" 'You scoundrell' I shouted. 'How dare you take away my girl? If you're a man, come out and fight for her!'

"The elder lashed me with his whip, and a group of horsemen surrounded me. Tavadlyants was as white as a sheet and did not say a word.

" 'So this is how you keep your word, Tavadlyants,' I said to him. 'It is not worth much. Did I fight that bear for two years and lose all that blood to have my girl given to that miserable milksop? Well, if your vaunted son-in-law is a real man, tell him to stop hiding behind women's skirts and come out and fight for her.'

"When the bridegroom heard this, he walked aside, and aimed his gun at me. Say what you like, he was man enough for that. But he was all pale and shaking—he knew that if it wasn't for his gun I'd have skinned him alive.

"I slipped among the horses and leaped at him like a lynx. But before I could stick my dagger into his heart, there was a flash, something struck me in my shoulder, a cold shiver ran down my body, and all was dark.

"Before I dropped down, however, I heard Vartanush shriek wildly and her father yell, 'Hold her, my daughter's gone mad!'

"I regained consciousness about four days later and saw around me the familiar smoky

walls and ceiling of my parents' house. As before, Mother sat by my bedside dabbing her eyes with her apron.

"Yes, my lads, that's why I say that it's a dishonest gadget this damned gun—it broke down a real brave. May the man who invented it never know a moment's peace!"

Finishing his story, the old man started filling his pipe with trembling hands, his dimmed glance fixed on the scarlet coals of the fire.

A long and depressing silence ensued.

"What about Vartanush?" my comrade ventured at last. "What happened to Vartanush?"

The old man took his pipe out of his mouth.

"Vartanush became unsettled in her mind and started wandering in the woods. In a few months she died.

"After her death the world was empty for me. I rambled in the mountains, broken-hearted, and sang the saddest of songs about my beloved. Sometimes I would visit her grave at night, and cry myself to sleep, with my head on the gravestone. I would dream I was walking with Vartanush in our beautiful woods and gorges.

"Those dreams were the only thing that was left to me. I carried my love all through my

life—~~seventy~~ years. I never married—my heart was pining for Vartanush. One night I got into Tavadyants's house through the chimney-hole and sent Oganess's sinful soul to its last home. After that I joined a gang of outlaws and started putting the fear of God into the hearts of the rich.

"Yes, my lads, that's it," Grandad Vartan concluded in a louder voice, as if trying to dispel the sorrowful memories, and rose to his feet.

We went out.

The night was lovely. It wasn't too cold and there was a thin gauze of falling snow in the air. It promised us splendid hunting.

THE WHITE LEADER

WE LOOKED ROUND stopping at the foot of a familiar range of mountains. The Ararat valley came up close to the range. The sun was going down beyond the Little Ararat and the valley was flooded with orange light. In the glow of the setting sun the Aras sparkled and rippled between two light-green fringes of rushes.

The cold late autumn wind was blowing from the mountain-tops. We were dressed too lightly and had got chilled through after a whole day's trampling down into gorges and ravines and up on to the spurs again. It was all of no avail—not a goat did we see but only endless flights of partridges and wild hens, that would flush noisily right from under our feet, filling the quiet evening air with their cries and the flapping of their wings.

There was only one hope left—to go further up, to the top of the ridge, and have a look in the mountain meadows. We might find foxes there—they usually come to these meadows to hunt mice. The earth is softer there and well dunged by the herds during the summer grazing. Moles love this sort of ground and mice are their willing companions and neighbours. And if there are mice, look out for foxes.

“We might even find goats there,” my companion Anushavan suggested:

I had little hope of that, but did not argue. To my surprise Anushavan proved right. When we reached the top of the ridge and I peered out cautiously from behind a large rock, I went hot all over at the sight of a whole herd of wild goats grazing peacefully in a small hollow.

“What did I say?” Anushavan whispered into my ear. Overcome with excitement, he fired.

The goats rushed away in panic. I just managed to lift my gun and shoot without aiming. One of the goats staggered. I got 'im!

“Don't shoot just anyhow. Pick 'em! Try and get that white leader!”

It was a huge male goat with gigantic

horns, snow-white all over. I've never seen anything like him.

He was so big that he looked like a white goose in a covey of grey partridges. We were no less surprised to see that he was the only male in the herd. Usually there are quite a few of them at this time of the year. At the end of November, when coupling time comes, the males fight savagely for the females. This giant must have defeated all his rivals and driven them out of his herd.

Both of us aimed at him. I had always put much faith in my tried old Lebel rifle and it did not let me down this time either. My big brass blunt-nosed bullet knocked the goat down, but the next moment he was up again and racing away. We rushed in pursuit but he disappeared in a fold in the mountain.

We found a tuft of white hair where he had dropped, and further off traces of blood. He had undoubtedly been wounded.

A sheet of fresh snow covered the ground. We examined the place where the goats had been grazing and discovered more blood-stains. Two more goats had been wounded, but had escaped with the rest of the herd, which had gone to the right, while the leader had disappeared to the left.

"You go after the herd, and I'll follow the white leader," I said to Anushavan and we parted.

I was so hot my clothes and even my breast-pockets were soaked with sweat.

It was getting dark and I pushed on as fast as I could. Panting, I ran onto the crest of the highest spur. Judging by his tracks, the white goat had stopped to rest a few times. His left foreleg was wounded and there were blood-stains whenever it had touched the ground. It must have been a serious wound for him to abandon his herd and go off alone.

"But he won't get away from me," I thought exultantly and pressed on.

Probably he would not have got away either, but for a terrific wind that arose all of a sudden and was soon blowing with hurricane force. A thick fog wrapped the hills and the valleys. Swirls of hard snow hit me in the face. In a moment the goat's tracks were covered and I halted, mortified and alarmed. My spirits fell. I was wet through. The wind was stinging me like thousands of little needles. I was aware that apart from losing my quarry, I had got myself in a precarious position—caught by a night storm alone on a mountain-top.

I started down into the gorge. The wind was nearly blowing me down, and there was a bottomless precipice at my feet.

There was nothing for it but to stop. I sat down on a rock to think.

What was I to do? I could not go down the mountain alone, neither could I leave my comrade in the lurch. It is a sacred duty for a hunter to think of his comrade, to go looking for him and never to come home without him, dead or alive.

I shouted at the top of my voice:

"He-e-y! Anu-sha-van!"

The howling of the wind was all the answer I got. Then I was really worried. What if he'd slipped off a rock, or had been attacked by wolves? I fired. Still no answer. The darkness deepened, and the storm was getting fiercer.

Again I went up and ran the whole length of the ridge to its eastern end, where I went down into a gorge. There was no wind here and it was comparatively warm. But I was so exhausted that my legs were giving way under me.

"Anushavan! Hey, Anushavan!" I kept shouting, plodding along the gorge.

Then I turned into another gorge and went up onto the ridge again.

The storm had swept by and the soft autumn night shrouded the mountains in mystery. It was so quiet that I could hear the rumble of wheels and the puffing of an engine down in the valley on the railway track to Nakhichevan.

I recalled autumn nights many years back when I used to go to the mountains with other boys to watch the herds. . . . We'd climb to the top of a hill and shout at the top of our voices calling some comrade who was far away looking for a stray cow. What if I called Anushavan in that same old manner? I put two fingers of each hand into my mouth and whistled for all I was worth.

The gorge echoed my whistle and the next moment I heard an answering whistle from the other end.

I leaped with delight—Anushavan was safe and sound. We met down in a narrow ravine and stumbled along in the dark towards the lights of Arazdayan railway station.

We were so excited by our extraordinary adventures that neither bad hunt nor fatigue could dampen our spirits.

The next day Vago and Mikhran, shepherds

at the Arazdayan state farm, took dogs and went to search for the goat I had wounded. They found him by following my directions, but they had no guns, and the goat, although he had only three legs, was not one to be tackled with bare hands.

"He was as big as a bull, the brute," Vago told us afterwards. "We've never seen a goat that size in our mountains. The dogs hung on his back but he turned and tossed them off with his horns so that they rolled away whining. His horns were like branches of a huge tree and his hair as white as cotton-wool. If only we had had a gun."

And there we lost the white goat. He escaped and we never saw him again and did not even know whether he died or recovered. But a hunter's life is full of surprises. Who knows, perhaps we shall yet meet the white giant. Perhaps Anushavan, Andrush, and Suren have come across him today and will bring him back from the hunt. There's a blizzard raging outside and the wind is howling, while I sit at home writing these lines and listening impatiently for sounds of my friends' return.

* * *

My comrades came home from the hunt without having seen the white goat. You would have thought he had vanished into thin air. But my luck was with me and I met my old acquaintance once again.

It was a warm sunny day in the late autumn. We entered the gorge and began climbing hastily. At the edge of the plateau lay a big rock the shape of a crouching bull. We took cover behind it and peered out. Right in front of us was the grassy Maral-Bakhan, the highest mountain here. A huge herd of wild goats was grazing tranquilly on its southern slope.

A huge white goat stood on a rock, watching out for signs of danger. I looked at him through field-glass and was thrilled with joy.

"The white leader! Anushavan, look, the white leader!" Anushavan snatched the binoculars out of my hand. "That's him, sure enough. So he's alive after all!"

"He must've had a hard time this winter with his wounded leg," I thought.

From the eminence of his rock the goat looked down proudly on the hills and gorges dozing in autumnal repose and at the Ararat valley that spread at the foot-hills. He looked

like the ruler of these parts. We gazed at him fascinated.

The goat shook his head and uttered a guttural sound, as though summoning somebody. And indeed, a grey he-goat with a black band on his chest and steeply curved horns detached himself from the herd immediately and walked up to the leader. The goats held their heads close together and remained in that posture a few seconds as if conferring in their goat tongue.

Then the white leader looked in our direction, sniffed the air several times and went on whispering to his "deputy." Perhaps he was telling him that he could scent something suspicious and advising him to be on his guard.

Leaving the grey goat on the rock the leader went down and started nibbling the grass hungrily. The new guard at first stood at his post proud and motionless like his leader, but soon he got tired and began shifting from foot to foot, looking round, and now and then plucking at the blades of grass that grew among the stones.

Noticing this, the white leader snorted threateningly. The grey goat stopped his tricks at once, stood erect, and vigilantly sur-

veyed the surrounding hills and valleys. But not for long. His fidgety nature or, possibly, hunger won the day, and in the end he abandoned his post altogether, went down into the valley, and started grazing.

Then a surprising thing happened. The white leader cried out sharply and furiously, rushed at the grey goat and butting him fiercely with his huge horns forced him to resume his position on the rock. Not until the grey goat was calm and motionless at the appointed spot, did the old one go down again. He was so indignant that he could not control himself for some time, and stood stamping his feet without resuming his grazing.

The herd seemed to share his indignation. Too many misfortunes had come of similar carelessness. Many were the times when the crafty wolf, or—the craftiest of all—man had stolen upon them, unnoticed, and shed their blood, or when birds of prey—eagles and griffons—had dropped from the sky right in the midst of the herd, and carried off their young. Danger followed them every minute of their lives. That was why the old leader had been so severe towards his young “deputy.”

The day was clear, the sky was cloudless.

But all of a sudden the partridges ceased their song and startled rooks flew over us and took shelter in the rocks. Fear crept into our hearts, too: a storm was obviously approaching.

The white leader sniffed the air anxiously and with a short sharp cry called the goats together around him. The grey "deputy" came down too. The white goat led the way towards a ridge of sharp inaccessible rocks. The nimble-footed goats ran up the narrow paths they had trodden among the rocks and hid in deep crevices and caves.

A cold wind blew across the plateau. Clouds gathered as though from nowhere, thickened, darkened, and hung over the earth like a sheet of lead. A terrific snow-storm broke out over the mountains.

If men had as highly developed an instinct and foresight as goats, we could have found shelter in the rocks too. But we realized what was coming only too late and got drenched and chilled to the bone before we found a damp cave, where we took refuge and lit a fire to warm ourselves.

When the storm passed by, the white goat was the first to appear on the top of a neighbouring cliff.

He surveyed the nearby crags, looked down into the gorges, and scanned the distant mountains. Seeing nothing suspicious he went back to the cave and reappeared a minute later at the head of the herd.

How I'd have loved to lay his magnificent white skin at the feet of my beloved and to nail his horns over the door of our house. "A hunter lives there," people passing by would have said. But I had grown fond of this animal whom I had known for so long and had nearly killed some years ago. He had survived and there he was risking his life to guard his comrades. So I did not shoot at him, but let him go unharmed. Only after almost the whole of the herd had topped the ridge did we raise our guns and one of the goats that brought up the rear rolled to the ground.

* * *

Winter came. Snow-storms raged in the mountains and large packs of wolves prowled about. And yet every time we could manage it we came to our favourite hunting spot and clambered over the rocks, trailing goats. Every now and then one would drop knocked down by a well-aimed shot. On one

occasion I peeped into a gorge from behind a rock and my heart missed a beat. The white leader! Something must have alarmed him for he raced over the face of the mountain leading the herd away to the safety of inaccessible crags. But soon he returned, accompanied by five other big males who walked with their horned heads lowered threateningly. Only then did I notice an old wolf, who was running up the slope in pursuit of the goats.

The wolf jumped at the leader's throat, but the goat leaped back. Behind him was a rock and he had no choice but to give battle.

He dealt the beast such a blow with his enormous horns that the wolf dropped stunned on the ground.

I aimed at the wolf and fired. The goats fled in panic, leaving the eternal enemy of the goat folk writhing under the rock in death agony.

* * *

The next autumn I saw the white leader again, and again engaged in combat—but this time with his own kind.

Beyond the Maral-Bakhan Range stands the lonely rocky Mount Asli. I was sitting in

one of its folds under a barberry bush, eating its sourish red berries and gazing at the silver band of the Aras winding its way down the Ararat valley. It was a mild and sunny day. I felt nice and cosy in my recess.

Suddenly I became aware of strange sounds coming from below—like of a pick striking against the rock. I crawled to the edge of the rock and looked down. Him again!

A big grey goat was stepping back one moment and rushing furiously forward, his horns lowered menacingly, the next. He was attacking the white giant who stood his ground, dignified and motionless as though rooted to the spot. He looked like Ursus in a Roman circus. A little way off a young female goat stood under the brow of the cliff, starting shyly at every blow.

"Ain't that there lady lucky?" my comrade asked me. "Two giants fighting for her."

The goats were so engrossed in their battle that they did not notice us or hear our conversation.

"What about bumping off that white male?" Anushavan asked me.

I glowered at him so fiercely that he shut up at once.

"That apple of discord, now, that new Cleo-

patra certainly deserves punishment for sowing enmity among peaceful animals," I said. Then I took aim and shot her down.

The fight stopped, the males rushed off, but meeting a wall of rocks, they hurled themselves in mad terror down the cliff.

"That's the end of them," I said. "They'll be lying down there. Come on!"

Anushavan chuckled.

"Were you born yesterday, or what? Why do you think nature gave them those huge horns?"

And indeed presently we saw the white leader and his grey rival racing away along the ridge of a far-off mountain. They were sound and hale.

Only then did I realize why Nature had endowed goats with those enormous horns, so out of proportion to their body, and heads as hard as cast iron. I had always thought the scars on the horns of the goats I killed were marks of the furious fights they had over females every autumn. I knew now that, when escaping from a hunter or a wolf, the goat can hurl itself down a precipice horns foremost and remain alive.

"Isn't Nature ingenious!" my companion marvelled.

Whistling gaily we went down to commit to fire the sinful heart of the white goat's beloved.

* * *

After that whenever I went hunting in Maral-Bakhan, I always hoped to catch a glimpse of the white leader and even felt sad when I didn't.

Having tracked down a herd of goats I never fired before making sure that my old acquaintance wasn't there.

But time went on, and I did not meet him any more.

I knew he was the oldest male goat in our parts. His horns were over a yard long. Every year a ring about two and a half inches wide is added to a goat's horns. The last time I saw him there were twelve or thirteen of those rings. Was he still alive, I wondered.

Some years passed. One warm autumn day I saw several male goats on the slope of Maral-Bakhan. They had spent the spring and summer in rich mountain meadows away from the females and had come back to the herd fat and sleek. After the long parting, the sight of their beloved' intoxicated them to the point of madness.

Their eyes bloodshot, blind with passion and jealousy, forgetting food and drink, the males either ran after the females or, as they were doing now, fought for them with their terrible horns.

Suddenly I saw the white leader standing a little way from the rivals and my heart contracted with pity. He was quite old, and had grown very thin, stooped, and shrunken under the weight of years. In comparison with his wasted body his horns seemed still longer and too heavy for his head to carry.

The white leader no longer took part in love-fights of the males, no longer led the herd. Grim old age had quenched the fire in his blood and dulled his desires: he was now just an indifferent onlooker.

Two young goats, furiously butting each other, came and knocked against him. The old goat started and for a moment levelled his enormous horns at the rivals as if to say, "Don't harm each other, life isn't worth it; in the end you will be like me."

In the fire of the fight one of the goats forgot the respect due to one's elders. He struck the old goat with his horns and flung him aside muttering something angrily. Perhaps he was saying something like "What

are you doing here, getting into people's way, you old fogey?"

The old leader moved aside humbly, trembling all over. The sight of his humiliation pained me immeasurably. "How cruel Nature is to the weak," I thought. I remembered the white goat risking his life to defend the herd against the wolves. He was strong then and everyone bowed down to him.

Thus abused the old goat walked off to the edge of the cliff, put his front legs on a stone, raised his head, and with a dimmed glance gazed out over the gorge that merged with the Ararat valley.

Even now he still had something of his old dignified and majestic air. He had not lost all of his former beauty—his legs were still slim, his body slender, his large head was still crowned with magnificent horns. I looked at the beautiful creature admiringly and it pained me to think that his end was near.

* * *

On a bright spring day I wandered about the familiar hills, lonely and sad. Every stone, every bush here evoked swarms of bright

memories. With friends of my boyhood and youth I had spent here the happiest hours of my life. Shouting joyfully we would chase wild goats along the steep mountain paths or from a hiding place in the rocks would watch their life, listening to the whistle of the wind and the cries of eagles on the crests of the cliffs.

There was the rock we had hidden behind as we watched the proud, majestic figure of the white leader standing on guard at the summit of the Maral-Bakhan and scanning the expanses before him. And there were the caves where he had sheltered the herd from the storm.

After twelve I reached the slope of the mountain where the white leader had fought the wolves who, but for him, might have torn to pieces the very same impudent young goat who had pushed him out of the way so discourteously the previous autumn.

My reminiscences were cut short by the sound of a stone rolling downhill.

I saw some goats on the slope across the gorge. Above them, on a high rock stood a huge he-goat, white-grey, with a broad black band across his chest. I recognized the pupil of the white leader.

Immovable as a stone figure, he was guarding the herd. He was the leader now. I lay still behind a bush. But the wind must have carried the suspicious smell, and the grey goat made a sign to the herd. Leaping from rock to rock the goats fled down and disappeared in a fold of the mountain. And only after the last goat reached safety, did the new leader leave his post unhurriedly with a last triumphant look back.

He did everything down to the smallest detail in exactly the same way as the white leader used to do; I even wondered whether he was perhaps his son. But where was the old one? He was not in the herd and I felt melancholy. What had happened to the poor fellow? Had a wolf killed him, or had his old trembling legs given way under him and he tumbled into a precipice while trying to keep up with the young?

I went down into the valley and made my way to that terrible gorge the hunters had told me so many weird stories about. Countless hives of wild bees live up there in the rocks. They build their homes in the crevices of naked rocks, fill the combs with honey, seal up the outlets with wax, and there in warm spacious quarters spend the winters

in ease and luxury enjoying the fruits of their labours and defying the bears who cast hungry glances at the hives. There are even leopards in those rocks, who would lay in ambush by the watering paths used by mountain sheep and goats.

I walked cautiously along a path that wound along the crest of the ridge and looked apprehensively down into the dark yawning abyss. I could hear a stream gurgling at the bottom. It was not for nothing that the people of the neighbouring villages called this gorge Djakhandam-darasi—Hell's Gorge.

An old hunter from Gerovan village told me that in the rocks overhanging this gorge there was a burial-place of wild goats.

"Your white leader wasn't born white," he told me. "They are all the colour of the rock or dry grass so that a wolf or a man could not see them from afar. They grow white in old age, just like people do. White and weak. And when they feel that their days are counted they drag themselves to a big cave in Djakhandam-darasi to meet their end beside the bones of their forefathers."

An irresistible desire to see this cave was driving me forward along precarious moun-

tain paths. High up in the vault formed by a huge rock I saw a big beehive stuck to the stone. I shot at it and a piece of honeycomb dropped onto the path. Bees flew out of the hive buzzing fiercely. I picked up the honeycomb and escaped at a run. Reaching the entrance of a cave with a spring of clear cold water flowing out of it, I stopped for a rest, ate the honey, and lying down by the spring drank some water greedily.

Then I entered the cave, clutching my gun at the ready.

The cave was very damp. The walls were slimy, water was dripping from above, a spring ran out of a crack in the rock. In the semi-darkness of the cave I distinguished heaps of bones strewn all around and among them large horns of mountain goats. One pair—a truly gigantic one—looked familiar.

The body of the goat had not yet quite rotted away. I turned it over and the first thing to catch my eye was a big scar on the joint of a foreleg—the reminder of an old bullet wound. The fractured bone had knitted all crooked. In the place of the fracture there was a crude knot, like the growth on a damaged spot of a tree.

I smashed the bone and took out a big

brass bullet with a blunted` nose—my own handiwork.

The old hunter had told me the truth—this was a goats' burial-place, and in front of me, beside the bones of his forefathers lay the remains of an old friend of mine, the lord of the Red Rocks—the White Leader.

BUCK

WE STOPPED for a rest at the foot of Mount Asli and drank our fill from a cold mountain stream.

The heat was oppressive. Around us were high, almost inaccessible ranges. I did not feel like climbing them under that scorching sun. It was so cool and pleasant in the shade of the leafy mulberry-trees. I yearned to lie down and let the gurgling of the water lull me into a sweet sleep. But those were thoughts unworthy of a hunter, and I did not dare to give them utterance. My comrades would make me the laughing-stock of the town.

But they were tactful fellows. They understood and helped me out.

"You're a heavy man," one of them said to me, "you'd better stay here and have a go at

the partridges, while we climb up to look for the goats."

Needless to say, I agreed without a moment's hesitation.

My comrades went off and I sat down under a tree and sank in thought, listening to the water splashing among the stones.

My setter Buck sat in front of me and I could read rebuke in his kind intelligent eyes. My dog's nature was a direct contrast to my own. He could not bear laziness. Once you went out to hunt you had to bring something home, he reasoned. When we went hunting he would get down to the job at once.

Now, too, he sat facing me and gave impatient whines. "If you were so sleepy why didn't you sleep at home instead of dragging yourself and me all the way here?" he seemed to be asking. He whined, licked his lips, and darted glances at the rocky hill some way off.

"Now, you ought to be ashamed of yourself," Buck's look said. "Get up, we'll find some nice things over there."

The dog's reproachful glances shamed me. I rose and picked up my gun.

Transported with joy, Buck jumped up to my breast, licked my hands, and ran ahead.

Huge lumps of rocks were scattered about the slope of the hill. Reaching them Buck stopped dead, his tail stretched out.

A set!

There must be something there.

All I had to do was to raise my gun, aim it, and say: "Go!"

A covey of partridges flew up from behind the rocks. I fired, but not a single bird dropped. The covey descended coolly on the other side of the hill.

I did not feel equal to the effort of climbing the hill, so I returned to the spring and lay down in the shade.

Buck returned too, sad as any true hunter is when foiled in his expectations. In his mournful glance I could read the verdict: "No, you're no good and never will be."

I fell asleep lulled by the soft murmuring of the water and rustling of the leaves swaying in the breeze. What is Buck, after all? A dog—nothing more. What does he know about the luxury of such sleep?

"Get up, get up!" I heard.

I woke up and saw my comrades surrounding me, surprise written on their faces. The goat they had killed lay nearby and Buck sat beside it, a sly look in his cheerful eyes. He

was sweeping the ground with his tail and licking his lips with pleasure.

"What's this?" one of my comrades asked me. "Using a partridge for a pillow?"

And indeed, there was a partridge lying by my right cheek.

I rose, amazed.

"Is that your doing, Buck?" I asked the dog showing him the partridge.

He looked at me with a merry twinkle in his eyes. I almost expected him to say, "Who else's? I had a look around while you were asleep and that's what I found."

I told my friends how I had fired and not hit a single partridge. I was too lazy to go and look, but Buck obviously wasn't. He ran to the other side of the hill, searched about, found the partridge I had wounded, brought it back, and lay it by my cheek. And then he must have sat waiting and anticipating my surprise.

Buck listened to my story uttering short joyful yaps, his eyes laughing. "The clever beast, he understands every word I say," I thought.

"Still, it's strange Buck went to see whether there was a partridge lying there," one of my companions said with a meaningful smile.

He meant to say that Buck knew well enough that I always missed, so why should he bother to look.

What could I answer him?

The only retort I could think of was: "Buck is a clever animal. He knows his master would not waste a shot."

At this point Buck "smiled" again with unconcealed irony as if he wanted to say, "You'd better stop wondering about it. It's anybody's guess who killed that bird."

Everybody understood and laughed.

THE BIG HEART

I PULLED the trigger, and the reeds came to life. A great number of wild ducks flew up beating their wings noisily, and water-hen scuttled away to shelter among the reeds.

Three birds I had hit were struggling at the edge of the lake—one of them was dark grey and about the size of a pigeon, the other two smaller and lighter in colour, hardly fully fledged yet.

One of them was not dead. It had only been stunned by the shot and when I picked it up it revived, opened its fear-dimmed eyes, and gave a feeble piteous squeak.

As if in answer to this squeak a rustling of wings was heard in the air. A bird struck softly against my shoulder, brushed my cheek with its wing, and fell on the ground. It fluttered at my feet and then, gathering its

strength, ran off, perched on a stone some short distance away, and began crying mournfully. It had long legs, a long beak, and grey feathers. It must have been the little birds' mother.

The surviving fledgeling stretched out its neck and squeaked again—in a thin wretched little voice.

The mother responded with so despairing a cry that even I, a "stony-hearted hunter" felt a pang of pity.

No words can describe the pain and grief in the cry of a bird that had lost its children.

I heard somebody's steps behind me and looked round. A peasant was approaching me. On his shoulder he carried a rake with some of the prongs missing.

The peasant stopped, listened for a while to the bird's crying, and asked me:

"You haven't killed her young, have you, brother townsman?"

"How did you know?"

"By the voice, of course. Can't you hear her crying and moaning?"

He lowered himself on the ground beside me, rolled a thick cigarette with his crooked fingers, and said placidly:

"She'll die, the poor bird, she will, and no

mistake. That bird will never forget her little ones—she has a heart in a thousand—a true mother's heart."

Puffing at his cigarette calmly, the peasant told me a curious story:

"Last year my wife and I came here to rake the hay I had mown. Our cat followed us here. Well, it was like any other cat. The whole day long it hunted the birds, hiding in the reeds, lying in wait behind the stones. At last it got hold of a fledgeling that had been careless enough to go out into the open. Its mother fell on the cat from above like a stone while the father clutched at its neck trying to peck out its eyes. The cat was so enraged that it struck out and tore the fledgeling's wing. The father and mother shrieked terribly and attacked the cat with redoubled fury. They finally forced it into the lake where it drowned at once—went to appear before the eyes of its Creator, while the little bird was left rocking on the surface as if it were in a rocking cot."

The old man smiled kindly and added:

"You should have seen the two parents take the little one into the reeds, supporting it tenderly on both sides."

He paused, drew in the acrid smoke of his cigarette, and went on:

"Another time we were making hay here and our neighbour's boy caught a fledgeling in the reeds. The way its mother cried made us nearly weep ourselves.

"When we came here on the next day it was still at it, half groaning, half singing. It wrung our hearts to listen to it—it sounded so much like a woman who had lost a child. Those were the years of the big war, just before the Revolution. Most of our people had lost somebody—a son, a husband, or a father. This bird reminded us of our own dear ones. That is why people wept when they heard it."

While the peasant was telling his story, the bird sat on the stone crying with the same pain and anguish.

"Well, what happened then?" I asked.

"It cried like that for two days and two nights, and then drowned itself in the lake. Yes, brother townsman, you may say it's just a tiny little bird, but look what a big heart it has. This one won't stand it either—she'll die sure enough."

I took leave of the peasant, hung my catch on my belt, putting the live fledgeling in the bag, and plodded along the sandy bank of the lake, followed by the mournful, heart-rending cries of the mother-bird.

On my way back at sunset, I returned to the place, wondering what had happened to the bereft mother.

The mountain lake was lapping the shore peacefully in the rays of the setting sun, the birds were whistling sleepily in the reeds. Their voices died out gradually and the lake seemed to be dozing, caressed by the soft fingers of the mountain breeze.

The serenity around was only broken by anguished complaints of the poor lonely bird. Her sorrowful moans, rending the quiet of that deserted spot, with its mysterious splashing of the water, and the rustling of the reeds, shook me profoundly.

Briskly I walked up to the familiar stone, took the live fledgeling out of my bag, placed it before its mother, and hurried away.

Looking round I saw the mother caress the little one, smoothing out its ruffled feathers. Its melancholy song had ceased. The night's calm enveloped the lake and the reeds.

A CRANE ON GUARD

SPRING was marching northwards - rejuvenating the cold lands with its warm sunshine and accompanied by its joyful heralds—swallows and cranes, snowdrops and irises.

It started at the coast of the Indian Ocean and finally reached our parts after crossing Persia. The Aras valley was the first to be conquered; then Spring broke the slumbers of the Ararat valley and began a leisurely attack on the mountain ranges.

When the Shirak steppe came in sight, Spring's companions and harbingers, the cranes, turned towards the Karakhach ridge. Here it was still cold and hard snow drove through the wet fog.

Alarmed, the cranes began to hurry. They had to fly over the Jajur range, cross the Lori gorge, and the length of Georgia before they reached the warm, hospitable Black Sea coast where food was abundant. But the fierce

Karakhach blew its icy breath on the Shirak st ppe. The cranes' damp wings were soon covered with a crust of ice, and their leader gave a cry of alarm, made a circle and, flying a little way back, alighted with his flock on the top of a low hill by the Akhuryan River.

The hill was open to the winds, and the birds shivered with cold, looking yearningly down into the gorge where it was warm and windless, and where Spring was hiding in the shelter of the rocks.

Several young and inexperienced cranes spread out their wings and were about to start for the gorge to seek warmth and protection from the wind, but the old leader called them to order with threatening cries.

He knew that the gorge was full of dangers; it was not like an open plain where the view was clear on all sides; in the gorge there was always the risk of a hunter creeping on them unobserved; wolves, foxes, eagles, and griffons were on the look-out in the rocks, their sharp claws ready for a prey.

That is why an experienced leader will never come down in a gorge, but always on a hill that commands a view. But if there are some ruins or rocks or shrub on the hill or nearby, some place where an enemy can lay in wait,

the leader will pass by and take the birds to some other spot where they will be out of harm's reach.

This time, too, the leader chose an unapproachable position. The cranes huddled close to each other, put their heads under the wings and dozed off. One of them, chosen by the leader, kept watch on a flat stone on top the hill.

Knowing that the cranes only felt safe because they trusted it, the guard kept a vigilant watch despite its great fatigue.

The blizzard hurled gusts of wind against the crane's body that pierced it to its very bones, but the crane made no attempt to get warm by huddling together. If it huddled, it would not see what was going on around. No, it had to stand at attention, its neck outstretched all the time.

But the terrible exhaustion was getting the better of the bird. A tremendous distance they had covered that day! Its wings felt bruised and broken, the muscles ached with the strain of the flight.

Little by little the crane nestled snugly and feeling pleasantly warm it dozed off. The wind no longer cut through it. . . . Oh, if only it could sleep for a while, just a little, just a

moment. . . . How sweet sleep is after a tiring journey.

The crane began to dream of hot swamps of the south, so rich in various foods.

A sharp blow on the head knocked it out of its nap. Opening its eyes with a start, the guard saw the old leader looking wrathfully at it.

With an apologizing cry the crane straightened up. The old leader went down muttering indignantly, and was lost among the flock.

All was still again. The cranes were sleeping calmly. The water of the river murmured monotonously, lulling the crane to sleep, obstinate irresistible sleep that spread sweet numbness over the bird's body.

A rustle made the crane start. So it had dozed off again! It was just too bad! What if a hunter stole near? Or if a wolf crept to the foot of the hill? What a fearful misfortune might have befallen the flock! How careless of the cranes to trust such an unreliable guard with their lives.

But sleep was overpowering the bird again, and it was no longer able to resist it.

Opening its eyes for a moment the crane saw its brothers ~~sleeping~~ calmly, confident that their guard was alert. It was seized with terror. What was it to do?

And suddenly it remembered its old mother and the way she had looked after the welfare of the flock and led it from the ocean coast safely through thousands of trials. How did she manage to keep watch without succumbing to sleep? Oh, yes, there was a method, his mother's method! He would do as his old wise mother used to do.

The crane stood on one leg grasping in the other a stone about the size of a hen's egg.

Sleep was so strong it was getting hold of the crane again. Its claws opened, and the stone fell to the ground with a clatter. The noise woke up the crane and it picked the stone up again. The guard did not fear sleep any longer and did not try to fight it. But each time it dozed off, its claws unclashed, the stone fell down with a clatter, and the crane woke up. It started, straightened up, looked round vigilantly, and dozed off again, clasping the salutary stone.

Once when the stone clanged against the rock, the crane woke up to see a strange shadow gliding among the rocks.

He gave a warning cry, and before the man had time to raise his death-inflicting weapon, the flock of cranes rose into the air and vanished in the morning mist.

THE TROUT

THAT YEAR we pitched our summer camp on the Aveluk-Urta tableland. A thin wood started at its edge, getting thicker and darker as it descended into the gorge. From the bottom of the gorge we could hear the dull, monotonous murmur of a mountain river. After heavy rainfalls it swelled out, grew turbid, and, roaring like a dragon awakened from his sleep, hurled itself against the rocks pulling out the trees on the bank, roots and all. On dry summer days the river forgot its violence and became a little stream, subdued and serene.

It was on this river that I spent my childhood, which, like this river, was at once wild and serene.

We used to bring the village calves to graze on the lushly grown banks in the delightful shade of the trees.

On hot days we left the calves by themselves and took a dip in the river. After bathing we lay on a big rock scorched by the sun.

At this spot the river dropped from an enormous height in a huge turbulent cascade—the Big Fall, as we called it. During the rains it was terrible to look at. The wall of water fell with a crashing noise that made the gorge tremble.

Long ago, Grandad Shakar, an old hunter, told us, there used to be lots of trout in the upper part of the river—above the Big Fall. But one rainy summer the river had overflowed its banks and rushed down, a boisterous torrent, carrying along all the fishes, mixed up with sand, mud, and stones. The fishes were unable to return and you never met any above the Big Fall.

After breaking out of the gorge the river flowed across the valley and joined the wide Akstef.

Every summer the trout would leave the Akstef and go up the turbulent mountain stream, just like the townsfolk leaving the hot towns for the country in the summer.

Trout is the noblest, the most delicate of fish. No poet can give it its due in his poems, no artist can reproduce its tender iridescent

hues on canvas. Nothing can match its dazzling beauty when it plays in the sunny crystal-clear water of a mountain stream. And it always yearns to go up-stream. Always higher—to the source of mountain rivers and streams, where it is ever cool and the water is fresh and clear.

By the beginning of autumn, the mountain rivers always got much shallower. Yellow leaves that dropped into the water piled up here and there, stopping the flow of the river, and the trout that lingered there were imprisoned in the pools and could not return home to the Akstef.

We used to hunt those captives in the pool below the Big Fall.

The pool under the fall was the fishes' last stop on their way up, to their "country residence." Here was the final obstacle that checked their progress up-stream. It was not that they didn't try to overcome it, though! Their fins spread, their gills puffed out, they'd throw themselves with all their might up the solid wall of falling water. For a moment their bodies, bright like shakhmar snakes, would glisten in the sun amid the white froth, but the next moment they'd fall down heavily. It was too high a barrier for them to jump.

Constant failures did not diminish their determination and they persisted in their attempts to get the better of the stream, to overcome the Big Fall and reach its summit, until cold days came and it was time to return to the warm and fragrant valley.

The fishes' desire to swim up-stream, always higher, was so passionate, their yearning for the cool mountains and gurgling well-springs was so boundless, that one day I made up my mind to help them realize their dream.

"Grandad Shakar," I asked the old hunter, "what do fish's eggs look like?"

"There, see that slime on the edge of the stone—that's fish's eggs."

I got into the water and examined the stones. So that's them! I picked up a stone. On one side there was some sticky slime, made up of separate grains looking very much like frogs' eyes. Just think how strong the instinct of the preservation of the young is in this fish—it lays its spawn on a stone so that it doesn't get carried away by the water.

I looked around until I had several such stones, put them in a pail of water and carried the heavy burden, panting, uphill.

The wood ended. Here the water in the river was limpid. It sparkled so merrily along

this sunlit mountain valley, it played so mischievously between its banks, that I realized why the beautiful little fishes were eager to get here. They had never seen these places, they did not know anything about them, but their forefathers had lived here a long time ago, in this sunny valley, in these cool and calm waters. A rushing torrent had carried them down into the Akstef River. They lived there and their children lived there, but in their blood remained the hereditary memory of this delightful valley. It became an instinct, an irrepressible striving upwards. A magic force draws them, generation after generation, up here, to this inaccessible valley.

I found a place where the river flowed over a big slab of reddish granite. In the course of thousands of years, the water had hollowed out a beautiful oval bath which sparkled with thousands of reflections, in all the colours of the rainbow.

I took the stones with the spawn out of the pail and put them into this bath. How fascinating must the little fishes find the world when they first see it in this granite bowl lit up by the rays of the mountain sun.

This thought made me so happy that my

mood seemed to have passed onto Bogar, a wolf-hound, the friend of my childhood. The dog put her front paws onto my shoulders joyfully and licked me in the face.

"Well, Bogar," I said, "we'll leave the spawn here in the bath and go and look for some trout in the pool under the fall, shall we? The same old agreement—you get the belly and I get the rest. Is it a go?"

The dog turned a somersault in the grass to signify her assent, and we went back down the river. I scanned its twists and whirlpools, looking for the graceful fishes.

I knew their habits well. They love to bask in the sun like people spending a holiday in the country.

Ah, there was one! In a quiet narrow curve, where the rays of the sun penetrated through the foliage and pierced the water to the very bottom. Under that stone was her hiding-place. With an elegant sweep of her fins she vanished the moment she caught sight of me, but the forked end of her tail showing from under the stone betrayed her. She's as good as in the bag!

"Stand off, Bogar," I shouted. "Don't you touch it!" With a quick movement I tossed the fish onto the bank.

It flew through the air, its dazzling colours flashing in the sun for a moment, and dropped onto the grass.

Bogar whined feverishly and licked her lips in the expectation of a delicious treat.

"See that lower pool, Bogar? There must be lots of fish there." Bogar eyed the pool attentively and wagged her tail.

"Perhaps you'd like to know how I can tell from so far off? It's just a matter of intelligence. I'm a man, Bogar, and you're a dog. You can't understand it. But it's really quite simple, you silly. Look at that little pool. See all that slime on the sand and on the stones. That means fish never lived there, never played about—or they'd have cleaned the place up and swept all this mud away with their tails. Now look at that creek over there. You can see at once that this country-house is inhabited. Every morning the tenant goes out for a stroll and tidies up the paths with its tail and fins. Understand? Well, let's go now and see whether I am right, or whether I'm barking up the wrong tree, like you do."

Bogar must have understood me for she looked reproachful.

"Oh, all right, don't sulk! You do bark all night long, without rhyme or reason.

Those wolves of yours are just a fancy, aren't they?"

We went down to the slimy pool. Sure enough, there was not a trace of fish in it, while there was a whole family of "holiday-makers" under the stones in the clear creek.

"Look, Bogar," I say. "Their tails are sticking out from under the stones. But don't you think you can catch a fish by the tail. Watch me do it!"

I put my hand into the water, caught hold of the head and pulled out a big fish onto the bank. It had a dark head and back, with dark sombre spots on its sides. Its head was large, its mouth wide, its fins long. It did not even look like a proper trout.

"This must be the eldest member of the family, what d'you think, Bogar? The father, I suppose, or even grandfather. Let's look for another one."

The next one was smaller. Its head was small, its body firm and fat, its colouring light, yellowish on the stomach.

"That's the mother," I said confidently. "Well, let's see who else is there. Why! Where are all those fishes I saw under the rock?"

The water around the rock has grown

muddy—they must have gone away. But no, there they were—under another rock.

"See that rock, Bogar, where the water is clearer? See the forked tail?"

I pulled out two fishes at once.

"There's fishing for you, Bogar!"

I picked up one of the fishes.

"This must be the son," I told the dog.

"It's like the father—the same big dark head—only a little lighter in the body—that's because he's still young."

Bogar gazed at the fish with an air of understanding.

There was a light of intelligence in her eyes and it seemed to me that she was listening with rapt attention.

I showed Bogar the other fish. It was quite tiny and remarkably pretty. It lay twitching on my palm, opening and closing its little mouth.

"This is a daughter, Bogar. Look—she's the very image of her mother. The mother probably looked just the same when she was young—this little one can't be more than two months old. Look how supple and nicely coloured she is. Her breast is golden and her sides are rosy. Shall we set her free, Bogar? Let her live."

I threw the little fish back into the water. She came to life at once and slipped under the stone, into her deserted house.

Poor little orphan! She had nobody to look after her any more—no parents, no brothers or sisters—she was all alone in this terrible world full of enemies.

Thoughtfully I put the fishes on a green leafy branch, while Bogar watched me with a melancholy question in her eyes.

We went back up-stream. I made a fire at the foot of the cliff and said:

“Let’s catch some more, Bogar, fry them, and then go back to our calves.”

I found a place where the river was squeezed tight between its banks and placed my sack across so that almost the whole of the water passed through it. Then I went up-stream a bit, blocked the other end, and poked with my stick under the stones to chase all the fishes down.

When I pulled my sack out, it was full of leaves and twigs. I shook the contents out and there they were, my little beauties, jumping and flouncing among the rubbish.

Bogar frisked about with delight.

In strict accordance with our agreement I gave her the fishes’ guts and we made quite

a feast of it. I put several fishes in the pail and carried them home live.

"We'll take these to Sona, Kochar's daughter," I told Bogar. "If you had the brains of man, you'd know that trout is the strongest medicine in the world. A sick man has only to swallow one little fish live—it must be live—and he will immediately get well."

Mother met me as usual with affectionate grumbling.

"You'd better stop always messing about in the water, sonny," she said, seeing my wet clothes and the fish in the pail. "Or else you'll be like your father, before you know it—always complaining about pain in the legs."

When Father came back from the fields, he was given fried fish for supper and his face lit up with pleasure. There was nothing he liked so much as the taste of his son's catch.

"You can see he's got the right blood in him—you won't see fish slipping out of his hands!"

Our neighbour Kochar's daughter Sona, a pale little girl with a puffed face and swollen legs, was always sitting out in the sun, leaning her back against the wall of their tent.

She was always cold, always shivering. The things our local leeches did to her, trying to cure her! Once they wrapped her in the hot skin of a lamb that had just been killed. They gave her mountain donkeys' milk to drink, telling her it was a red cow's and that it would make her strong and healthy.

Another time they gathered some eagles' dung, mixed it with fat and either made her swallow it or rubbed her with it—I don't know which. But nothing did her any good.

"Trout will cure her, it's sure to," Nazo, our village leech, used to say with conviction. She insisted that the girl should swallow a live trout.

Sona looked with apprehensive eyes at the fish splashing in the pail.

"Swallow it, my dear, don't be afraid," Nazo wheedled her. "Just shut your eyes and swallow it."

Sona finally swallowed a live fish, shuddering with revulsion, and immediately cried out in terror—the fish started beating in her stomach.

Several weeks passed, and when frost began to silver the grass every morning we moved back to our winter quarters, leaving

behind the little grave of our neighbour's girl Sona—the live fish had hastened her inevitable end.

Winter came, and I felt dull and lonely in our dug-out. I went outside. The mountains around our winter camp were shrouded in white mist—snow-storms were raging on the Khal-Khallu and Aveluk-Urta peaks.

Were my little fishes alive, I wondered. They must be terribly cold in their ice-bound tub.

I walked over to Grandad Shakar's place.

"Grandad, can fish live through the winter up there, in the river?"

"Yes it can, in deeper places. But there's no fish on the mountain, is there?"

I did not say any more. I told nobody of all those fishes that were growing up in the granite tub above the Big Fall. It was my secret.

The old man's answer set my fears at rest—the tub was deep enough.

At the beginning of the next summer we went up to the mountains again. No sooner had we finished setting up camp, than Bogar and I were in the sun-flooded valley over the Big Fall. From afar I could see the water in the creeks rippling and sparkling in the sun

—that could only be the fish playing and frolicking.

We came up to the river. Pretty little pink fishes were basking in the sun, their blue eyes staring at me. My joy knew no bounds.

“Now, Bogar, use that silly brain of yours—tell me who are fish’s enemies? What am I saying, though—as if you had any brain! Come along, then.”

That day I combed the whole valley and killed all the frogs I came across, Bogar had a huge dinner of them.

Since then, every day while the calves were grazing peacefully, I’d go up to my kindergarten, watching over the fishes, nursing them, happy that they were there, that they were growing, happy at my secret, my greatest joy.

But my secret was soon discovered by old Shakar—you couldn’t hide anything from the keen eyes of the old hunter.

I was scared stiff lest he should come fishing for them, but like all the other grown-ups he was too busy with hay-making to think about fish. As to the boys.... If they only dared to approach my tub.... But they didn’t—Bogar and I were formidable enough to put them off any such tricks.

I got so fond of my fishes that whenever there was a thunderstorm with showers I thought not so much of my calves' safety, as of the fishes'—what if the torrent carried them down again.

Once the fishes nearly caused armed hostilities between the women of our village and me.

It was a dry year and the sun was parching our fields and orchards. The women went to the river "to plough the water"—this was supposed to help bring on the rain.

The women harnessed themselves to a wooden plough and started wading in the water. My fishes dashed to and fro in panic. Many must have thrown themselves down the Big Fall.

A club over my shoulder, a huge fur cap on my head, I strode up accompanied by my enormous wolf-hound—my Bogar—and demanded that they should stop their "ploughing."

"Get off with you, you squint-eyed milk-sop, or we'll tell your father."

"I say stop this at once. Go down to the pool and 'plough' there as much as you like!"

The women took no notice of me.

"Stop it," I said, "or I'll have the dog on you!"

"He's crazy enough to do that," one of the women said apprehensively.

My bad reputation stood the fishes in good stead. The women went away, shouting abuse and curses at me.

"That's a strong firm man for you, Bogar," I boasted. "See that nobody dares come here."

When the hay-making was over, however, many developed a taste for fried fish. They praised me and invited to share their meal, but my heart bled at the sight of the fat fish.

"I thought you were a stupid thing, Bogar," I said to my dog, "but it looks as if I'm by far the stupider of the two.... The trouble we took over those fishes, and now the others are eating them. D'you think we ought to have a go at it, too?"

Bogar licked her lips and wagged her tail, looking as if she approved of my suggestion.

We went to the river and found Grandad Shakar, armed with a spade, building a dam across the stream.

"Hey, boy, come and give me a hand!"

I went over. Together we diverted the stream, and at once the river-bed stones showed from under retreating muddy water

and fishes began to splash between them in terror, rushing about in search of an escape.

"I'll shut the way out, and you collect them," Grandad Shakar ordered me.

I went up along the now shallow stream and saw multitudes of trout in the sand. They were all red, all of the same size, as if made to one measure, all alike, as children of one mother. Deprived of water they beat in the sand, wriggling convulsively, opened and closed their mouths in unbearable torment, gasping for breath.

My heart contracted painfully. I rushed to the dam, destroyed it hurriedly, and the river returned to its original bed.

"Let them live. What d'you think, Bogar?"

"Hey, you silly boy, what have you gone and done?" Grandad Shakar shouted indignantly from below.

Bogar started turning somersaults in the grass, unable to contain her high spirits, while I stood on a rock, laughing happily.

Not long ago I visited the cherished places of my childhood. As in my time, the river filled the gorge with its unending song. The trout, their fins spread out, still fought

their way up the heavy torrent of the Big Fall. Everything was the same. Only Bogar, the friend of my childhood, was not there to greet me. Grandad Shakar was alive, but bent by old age—he was eighty-five—he no longer went hunting.

He did not recognize me at once.

"You were a larrikin and no mistake," he said when he did, "but you've grown into a decent man, more's the wonder. D'you remember giving water back to the fish, Vakh-tang-jan? Well, you were just a boy then, a silly boy."

Grandad Shakar smiled good-naturedly in his white moustache.

"As a matter of fact," he added, "it was a good thing to do. Yes, it was a good deed, son, and let our Lord reward you for your kind heart."

I walked up-stream to the places dear to me by their memories, to that sun-flooded sparkling valley with the lovely creatures whose dream I once realized frolicking there.

I could not find my granite tub, for the river had changed its course and the tub had been filled in with sand and gravel.

The river was as cheerful and full of song in its new bed, as it had been in the old one,

but gone was the familiar flat rock on which we had liked to dry in the sun after a dip, gone was the creek where we had bathed astride buffaloes.

Now other children played on the banks of the river—the dear companion of my childhood.

There they were! They had built a turf dam across the stream and were bathing in the deep pool before it. Their gay shouting livened up the gorge. They were children from our collective farm.

Some had had their swim already and were lying in the sun on the grassy bank.

I went up and greeted them. They rose in embarrassment and began putting on their clothes.

“Well, is there any fish in the river up there, above the Big Fall?” was my first question.

“Yes, a lot,” answered one of the boys, screwing up his dark eyes against the sun that beat him in the face.

“I suppose you catch it and fry it on the fire?”

“Yes, a lot.”

“You *are* lucky devils,” I said enviously.

The trout I had carried up in a pail and giv-

en new life to were long ago dead, of course. But their children and the children of their children lived, played, and multiplied in the river.

I said good-bye to the children and went down to the village along the familiar winding paths.

For a long time I could hear the gay shouting of the children and it seemed to me it was the voice of my own careless and wild childhood, left behind on the banks of this swift mountain stream, coming to me through the thick wall of past decades.

OUR CHAMBAR

A HAILSTORM was raging outside. Father came in, shook off the drops of water from his fur cap, and sat down by the fire-place. Something stirred under his coat and I heard a thin squeak. I looked and discovered a tiny puppy.

"You poor little thing!" I exclaimed.

It was in a pitiful state, this blind little pup—its fur was wet, its paws muddy, and its muzzle cold. It was squeaking piteously and shivering all over.

I warmed it by the hot fire, smoothed out its fur and it calmed down and fell asleep in my lap.

When the doggie woke up it poked its nose into my hand until it got hold of my little finger and began sucking it. It was hungry, the poor beast. I dipped my finger in a bowl

with milk and the pup snatched at it greedily.

From that day on I became the guardian of our little Chambar and came to love her dearly.

When she was a little bigger, she used to meet me in the evening outside the village, whining joyously and rolling in the dust at my feet.

As time went on, Chambar grew into an exceedingly jolly and high-spirited young dog. She always accompanied me when I went out watching the calves in the summer—no matter whether it was rain or fog, days of happiness or days of trouble.

The Kazakh hills are known for their ruggedness. On a bright sunny day the sky would suddenly turn dark, a fierce wind would tear at the tents and all animals would hasten, panic-stricken, to hide in gorges. On such occasions Chambar helped me to drive the calves into a big cave in the Bear's Cliff. Wet and chilled to the bone, we would sit in the cave, clinging to each other and looking fearfully at the lightning flashing in the sky. But on cloudless sunny days we chased each other in the green meadows, wrestled, rolled in the grass, and were as happy as the day was long.

Soon Chambar was a fully grown dog. She was remarkably intelligent and kind-hearted. This huge wolf-hound was tenderness itself when dealing with children, lambs, or weak old people. But with an evil man she became a terror—she could pull a bandit from his horse, tear a thief to pieces, attack an armed man with a tiger's fury.

When she had her first puppies she became attached to them with the unspent force of maternal love and was even more considerate to all small things.

It was spring, and sheep began to lamb. Chambar kept a sharp look-out for all new-born lambs and always let us know when a lamb was born in some hidden nook.

One evening when we were driving the herd home we noticed Chambar had disappeared.

"Must've run off ahead to her puppies," my comrade suggested.

But I did not find Chambar at home. Her pups surrounded me, whining. They were hungry and missed their mother. I gave them some milk and they quietened down. But where could Chambar be? I counted the sheep

and discovered that one was missing. I took up my club and wanted to go back, but my mother did not let me.

The night was pitch dark and sombre, peals of thunder came from afar, every now and then lightning pierced the black sky. Soon a storm broke out. All night long the neighbouring wood groaned and sighed under its assault.

The next morning was bright and clear. We drove the herd to the grazing ground and started looking for Chambar, examining the bushes, that had just put on a dress of fresh young leaves. Behind one of those bushes a touching sight met our eye.

The lost sheep lay on the ground peacefully, chewing its cud. Beside her lay our Chambar, who must have noticed and recognized us long ago, but did not budge and only wagged her tail amiably. When we came closer the mystery was clarified—a new-born lamb lay sleeping between the sheep and the dog. How terrible must our world have seemed to this tiny creature, welcoming it with a dark night, terrific storm, rain, lightning, and deafening rolling of thunder. The fearsome forces of nature would inevitably have de-

stroyed this helpless little thing had it not been for Chambar, who sheltered it under her soft, warm fur.

I hugged Chambar's neck, tears of joy welling in my eyes.

"Chambar-*jan*, you darling little sister!"

Then I milked the sheep into a hollow in a rock and Chambar allayed her hunger. Seeing that there was no more danger for the lamb she had saved she began to whine, casting anxious glances towards the village. I understood she was worried about her pups and told her, "Go, Chambar, go to your children."

She licked my hand gratefully, jumped and touched my face with her nose, and then ran off.

* * *

The next year Chambar's pups perished—our neighbour's buffalo got onto the flat roof of our shed, and the roof fell through, burying the pups underneath it.

For three days Chambar disconsolately wandered about the meadows surrounding the village.

"Here, Chambar-*jan*, eat a little," Mother would say sympathetically, putting a bowl full of milk before the dog.

But Chambar only wagged her tail pitifully and crawled into a corner to mourn her loss in silence.

On the third day she dragged herself on her weakened legs to our grazing ground.

By the evening we missed Chambar and the two-weeks old calf of our cow Jeiran.

I rushed about like one demented, calling the dog by her name, looking for her everywhere, but she was nowhere to be seen. My grief was immeasurable—Chambar was my dearest friend.

"She must have pined to death over her children. I suppose she just dropped dead under some bush," Mother said with tears in her eyes.

As for the calf, we all thought that wolves had got hold of it.

A day later, however, we saw two animals at the foot of the Crows' Cliff. We hurried to them and saw Chambar lying there unconscious, while the calf was sucking her teets.

The unfortunate calf had fallen from a rock and broken its leg. And so all this time Chambar had nursed it and kept the wolves away, and in the end fainted with hunger and worry.

The whole village was shaken. Mothers cried recalling the children they had lost, while old men sighed and mumbled:

"To think that Nature has given such a heart to a dumb animal."

Old and young alike hurried to the spot. We put the calf and the dog on a cart and brought them to the village. The general joy and excitement was indescribable; as for me, I was half-crazy with relief.

Milk was brought and we began pouring it drop by drop into Chambar's mouth. Gradually she came to and opened her eyes which shone with ineffable kindness and sorrow.

Chambar got well and seemed to have got over her grief. She became as attached to Jeiran's calf as if it were her own pup and never left its side at the meadow, fearing for its life. No one dared to approach the calf.

Then she had a new litter of pups.

My heart aches when I recall the day our neighbour Matsak buried Chambar's pups alive. He was not to blame, however. It was a poor year, and even barley bread was a luxury. It was no time to breed dogs. So it was decided to sacrifice Chambar's pups. It was done so that she should not know.

I was so upset that I even cried and taking

a spade I wanted to go and rescue the pups, but I was not allowed.

That day Chambar was locked in the shed. During the night she escaped through a hole, found the grave and dug her little ones out.

At dawn we were woken up by a plaintive howl. Half-dressed we ran into the yard only to find Chambar dead on the grave of her children.

Chambar-*jan*, the companion of my childhood! How sad I feel when I remember you and your tender heart.

REVENGE

THERE WASN'T a man, a woman, or child in all the small villages scattered over the southern slope of the Mount Alagyozy, who did not know the Kurd hunter Davot. He was as strong as an ancient oak and as keen-eyed as an eagle, and had a huge head and a powerful chest like an old lion's.

Half a century before he had escaped from Turkey, evading the Cossack frontier guards at the foot of the Ararat, and had come to live in one of the mountain villages.

It became a custom in those parts that whoever came there to hunt had to go to Davot's house first, share a meal with him, and ask his advice where to go in order not to come back empty-handed from the hunt. On their return the guests would stay with Davot overnight and listen to his stories of times long past.

The fame of the old hunter reached our far-away Kazakh village, and I was eager to see him and hear his stories.

One day, when my friend and I, loaded with our hunting spoils, were heading for Karaburun railway station, hoping to catch a train there, we were caught in a snow-storm. The sky turned livid and merged with the earth, the paths became indistinguishable under the snow, and wolves left their lairs to look for such as us, lost in the snow-storm.

Driven by the blizzard, we reached a hamlet crouching under high cliffs and knocked at the door of the first cottage we came across. The master of the house asked us to come in, but the next moment, catching sight of the hare slung to my belt, stopped short, asked, "Hunters, eh?" and without waiting for an answer said to us, "Come with me."

He led us to the other end of the village to a ramshackle hut that stood a little apart, all by itself. At the door we were met by several wolf-hounds which were so hostile that we were forced to defend ourselves with the butt-ends of our rifles. But the door opened and an old man with white bushy eyebrows on a

shrunken face, a broad chest and short legs called back the dogs and asked us to come in.

In the middle of a spacious room, close to the fire-place stood an old grandfather *kursi*,* around which his old wife, two daughters-in-law, and three children sat with their feet in the warm *tonir*. They all wore Kurd clothes with beads and silver coins on their breasts and sleeves, and some even on their forehead.

"See, Uncle," said our guide, "I've brought you some visitors."

"I wish you health a thousand times, dear guests, you've brought joy to me and my old eyes. My poor house is yours, and all I have you can use as your own," the old man said warmly and bowed to us with Eastern courtesy; then he shook hands with us and asked us to take seats round the *kursi*.

His daughters-in-law got up and stepped aside, and we took their places.

There is nothing that can compare with sitting round a *kursi*, on a cold January evening

**Kursi*—a small table on short legs standing over a hole in the floor—*tonir*, where fire is kindled. After the fire has burnt out, people sit around this table, which is covered with a big carpet reaching to the floor, and put their feet into the *tonir*.

after coming back from the hunt, when the blizzard is howling outside and blowing snow through the *yerdik** and the cracks in the door.

We were soon warm and cheerful, especially when one of the old man's daughters-in-law brought in supper—mutton *khaurma*, pickles, crumbling Kurd cheese, cream and—the dream of a man caught in a snow-storm—a bottle of famous mulberry vodka.

“Goat feels more for goat than for a herd of sheep,” the old man said, pushing towards us the choice bits and the biggest glasses.

“He’s a hunter himself, you know,” said our guide, “that’s why you’re so welcome here.”

“You aren’t hunter Davot, are you?” I cried joyfully, jumping to my feet.

The old man’s dim eyes kindled up for a moment.

“Yes he is,” the guide said. “You’ve heard of him, of course?”

My joy knew no bounds. I talked animatedly, and, unable to hear enough of the old man’s stories, kept urging him to tell more.

We heard many fascinating things that evening about the life of the Kurds in Turkey,

**Yerdik*—the smoke-hole in the ceiling.

but one story moved me particularly and I promised the old man to write it down and tell it to the world. Now I'm keeping my promise.

* * *

When summer comes, Davot began his story, I drive my sheep herd into the mountains. Up there on the beautiful Alagyozy I would sit on a piece of rock by a murmuring stream and my eyes turn sadly to Mount Masis. Past troubles are revived in my memory and sadness grips my heart. Fifty years ago I left those I loved at the foot of that mountain. I remember my bride-to-be, my betrothed, slender like a plane-tree. Yusuf-bek took her away from me and gave her to his son for a wife. On a dark night I killed my rival and fled here. I remember the gorgeous crimson flowers that grew on the Artos mountain, and the bright frocks of the girls, as lovely as those flowers—the girls that came in summer from Diarbekir and brought youth and merri-ness to the old mountain.

Those were beautiful places, but my memories of my life there are mostly sad. Two images stand out among them, two images that haunt me always, that torment me day

and night. One of them is that of my beloved, with tears flowing from her eyes, and the other—that of a poor she-bear I'm going to tell you about for you to tell the world. Let people know that though a hunter may be constantly shedding blood, he has a heart and soul, and warm feelings the same as anybody else. Let people know that a dumb beast may have a heart too, and a heart a thousand times gentler than the hearts of those who took Davot's sweetheart away by force and doomed him to a life of exile, far from his beautiful native land.

Davot filled his pipe unhurriedly and went on after a pensive silence to tell of the events of fifty years back.

You townsfolk will find it hard to understand me. A Kurd lives all his life side by side with animals, and becomes attached to them with all his heart, so that the death of a favourite dog, sheep, or ox causes him nearly as much grief as the death of one of his dear ones. And no wonder, because the animals come into the world under our very eyes, we warm them with our bodies, protecting them from rain and hail, we nurse them as our own children and they have their place in our hearts. That is why I mourn at the thought

of my Lame Mokhnatka,* whom I nursed like a child of my own, who grew up in my house, and whose great sorrow I witnessed with my own eyes.

But, as they say, you won't be understood unless you start at the very beginning.

I was once hunting on the Artos Mountain. Opposite it is Mount Sipan, and on the other side spreads the majestic Van Lake. I used to sit for hours on the bluff slope of the Artos and, forgetful of everything else, admire the proud beauty of Van Lake. Down below, the mountain was encircled by the sparkling silver belt of the Semiramis River, that had fed the villages on the mountain slopes and on the shores of the lake with their fields and pastures for three thousand years. When the sun sank behind the tops of the distant ranges I would wake from my dreams, take my flint-lock and start out in search of bears.

I killed many bears among those rocks. Often enough, too, a bear got hold of me or flung me down a steep cliff so that I barely escaped with my life. I know the ways of bears as well as those of my sheep and dogs. I know that a bear feels strongly. A female

* *Mokhnatka* means a "shaggy one."—*Tr.*

won't be daunted even by fire when its cub is in danger, it will face a gun without fear.

On one occasion, however, I came upon a cruel mother bear. Actually, it was me who was cruel if anyone, shooting at a bear that was dozing tranquilly among the rocks. She jumped up with a furious roar, spitting madly, and finding no suitable object picked up her cub and hurled it in my face.

The next moment recovering from my astonishment I shot again—right into the maddened beast's muzzle. That quietened her. The cub lay at my feet whining with pain.

I wrapped it up in my coat and took it home. We offered it some milk—it would not touch it, neither did it take any interest in bread. Then we gave it to one of our dogs to nurse. She was a very clever dog and she adopted the bear cub and brought it up together with her own puppy.

The cub proved to be a source of unending delight for the children. Those were happy days indeed. From morning till night a living tangle of bear, children, and dogs rolled hilariously about the yard. Or else the children would climb a nut-tree and the cub would follow them there. Its fur was so long and fluffy that the kids called it Mokhnatka.

In August, when the fruit season began, the cub hardly ever left the fruit-trees—all day long it would hang onto the branches like a monkey, stuffing itself with fruit.

Once, when I thought it had been there far too long, I got annoyed and shook the tree (may my arm wither for this cruel deed): the poor beast fell down from the top of that tall tree and broke a leg. You should've heard the wailing of the kids! I set the bone, banded the leg, and looked after the cub until it was well again. While nursing it I came to love the little thing like a child of my own. It always limped afterwards and came to be called *Lame Mokhnatka*.

By the winter *Mokhnatka* was the size of a biggish calf. When she was in a playful mood she would hoist the dog, her foster-mother, on her back and carry it about with her peculiar bear's waddle.

In the autumn I started taking *Mokhnatka* with me when I went hunting. She was more useful to me than a donkey and a dog together. I'd strap a *khurjin** with food onto *Mokhnatka's* back and off we'd go. You should

* *Khurjin*—two carpet-bags joined together, thrown across the back of a horse, donkey or some other pack animal.

know, being hunters yourselves, what a strain it is to carry the catch back home when one is tired out by a whole day's tramp. Mokhnatka relieved me of this burden. I'd load the roe, gazelle, or mountain sheep on Mokhnatka and she'd follow me home waddling unhurriedly behind.

She was remarkably intelligent. I went hunting with her all through the winter and she got accustomed to this sort of life and learned to help me just like a man. When she saw me, for instance, squatting over a heap of dry leaves and twigs, striking my flint with steel, she'd go off to collect firewood and would bring it to me, walking on her hind legs and hugging the wood to her breast—just like a man. By the time I had got the fire going she would be dragging an enormous tree-stump along, snorting with the exertion.

When I spoke to her, I used special words that she understood. If I said "bokh," it meant: "Stand aside, I'm going to shoot," she would then walk aside, sit under a tree or behind a rock, and stop her ears with her paws. When I said "gech," she walked ahead, when I said "osh," she stopped, and if I shouted "ai, khavar," she hurried along to beat off the dogs.

During the hunt, if she saw me crouch and put my finger to my lips, she lay flat and remained motionless.

The only thing she feared was my gun. She knew by experience that this thing that looked like a club let off fire and smoke and produced a deafening noise carrying death with it, for immediately after either a goat tumbled from a rock or a deer dropped to the ground, its legs jerking in the air.

One day, as I was having my lunch by the fire, Mokhnatka suddenly took my gun from the branch I had hung it on and handed it to me. I noticed her gaze was fixed on something below in the gorge. I looked, too, saw some roes hurrying to the watering-place and fired. This convinced me that Mokhnatka understood what a gun was for and knew that it was this thing that felled animals to the ground to be later skinned and carved. Remember this well, otherwise the end of my story may sound like a fairy-tale to you.

* * *

So a year passed. Mokhnatka grew into a huge bear and became cleverer still. Often I went to hunt riding astride her along mountain paths.

Mokhnatka was the favourite of the whole village. She won particular admiration during summer when I took her into the mountains to help me watch the herds. Wolves made several attacks on the herd, but stopped bothering us after Mokhnatka taught them a good lesson: she caught one of them and whacked it against a rock so that it breathed its last there and then. After that we need have no fear of wolves, thieves, or robbers.

Mokhnatka's fame spread as far as the Van Lake district. Many traders offered me handfuls of gold for her, cattle-breeders wanted to buy her for thirty or forty sheep, but I would not part with my pet for anything. How could I! Apart from being worth at least ten dogs and two donkeys for me, she was a helper during the hunt, a powerful defender in moments of danger, and a beloved friend. Even if I yielded to the temptation and gave her away, she would never go of her own accord, and if they took her by force, she would escape and come back to me.

Once something of the kind actually happened.

In summer, tribes of Kurds came to our pastures from the banks of the Tigris with their numerous herds. That year one of the

best grazing grounds in our parts—on Mount Artos—was taken up by Yusuf-bek, who pitched his luxurious tent there and housed the pink-faced wives he had brought with him on richly adorned camels.

My heart sank when I heard this.

"No good will come to me from this bandit," I thought. "He'll take my bear away."

I moved to an out-of-the-way pasture, but there was no getting away from Yusuf-bek. No sooner had he heard of my bear, than he sent armed men to me with instructions to buy the bear or to take it by force if I refused to sell it.

They ignored my indignant protests and even compelled me to gag and tie up Mokhnatka with my own hands. Then they loaded her on a two-wheeled *arba* and drove away.

Gloom descended on our house. Crying disconsolately, the children saw our beloved Mokhnatka off to the place outside the village where the road topped a hill, while I went off into the mountains, sought refuge in one of the deeper gorges, and spent hours looking at Van Lake and singing mournful songs.

One night I felt something wet and hot touch my face. I jumped up—a huge bear was licking my face. My brain clouded by sleep,

I did not at once recognize Mokhnatka and stretched my hand for the gun. But the bear hurled the gun away and lay at my feet. Then I knew who it was, hugged Mokhnatka's head, kissed her wet muzzle, and broke out sobbing. So we finally went to sleep, lying close together.

When it became light I saw that the neck of the poor beast had been bleeding. I cleaned the wound. It had been made by a bullet. Then it dawned on me that something out of the ordinary must have happened in Yusuf-bek's camp. I burned a bit of cloth and putting the ashes to the wound bandaged Mokhnatka's neck with a silk kerchief.

The next day some shepherds told me that Mokhnatka had mauled one of Yusuf-bek's guards. The news spread over all the camps on the Artos. The bek's people organized a hunt, but Mokhnatka and I fled to places where the devil himself would not have discovered us.

In August, when the nomads went away, we returned home. You can't imagine the welcome we got. All the people of the village poured out to meet us. The kids climbed on the bear's back or hung to its neck and tail screaming with joy. Mokhnatka bore the

scamps' pranks patiently, grunting amiably. She was overjoyed to meet her foster-mother, whom she had not seen for two months and had missed badly. But she expressed her joy in a true bear-like fashion—standing on her hind legs, she picked the dog up and tossed her onto the roof of the house. The poor dog started running helplessly to and fro, unable to come down.

Autumn came. Mokhnatka accompanied me on my hunting trips as before, and in her free time sat perched on the trees eating fruit.

* * *

Towards spring Mokhnatka became thoughtful and irritable. Neither her foster-mother nor the children dared to approach her when she was in a black mood. After wandering in the mountains and fields she came home depressed—all her thoughts it seemed, remained in the gorges of the Artos. She whimpered sadly looking at the rocks—the home of her kinsfolk. She was particularly gloomy in the evenings. With the last rays of the setting sun she would walk out of the village, climb the top of the hill, sniff the air, and, feeling the nearness of bears, whine wistfully.

Nature was taking its course, and an urge had developed in Mokhnatka to love and to have children. And so, with her blood boiling with desire and her thoughts in a state of commotion, she moved about restlessly, longing to join those wild animals she had never seen and could not remember, but to whom she was tied by bonds of blood.

One evening, plodding along the Tigris gorge, I heard the roaring of bears behind. I looked round. Two bears stood at the entrance of a cave at some short distance and looked after us sniffing the air. Without waiting for me to say "gech," Mokhnatka walked towards them.

"Osh, Mokhnatka, osh!" I cried. She stopped and looked back hesitantly. I could see there was struggle going on inside her. But Nature got the upper hand.

I knew that even a human being has not the power to resist the call of Nature and let her go. Besides, June was approaching and I was eaten up by anxiety lest Yusuf-bek, who was coming again soon, would take Mokhnatka away and harass me on her account into the bargain. This consideration strengthened my determination to give Mokhnatka her freedom. I turned to go, but suddenly heard the

stamping of feet behind. Mokhnatka! She came to me, licked my hands, and let out a sorrowful howl. I understood that she loved me so much that she did not want to leave me against my will. I stroked her head pointing with my finger at the bears and said, "Gech!"

So Mokhnatka joined her own kind and started a new life, while I walked home overcome with melancholy.

* * *

As time went on, we began to forget Mokhnatka. I went hunting as before only no longer to the Tigris gorge—I did not like the idea of meeting Mokhnatka.

The southern slopes of the Artos are practically bare during summer. The sun burns out the young grass as early as June, and all that remains is an ash-grey mass of rocks, pebbles, withered bushes, and brambles. Only in the gorge by the springs is the eye relieved by green signs of life. An old leafy oak-tree stands on one of those denuded slopes, providing shade for travellers exhausted by the heat of the day and for herds of sheep. Even from some distance one can make out a narrow dark-green hollow somewhat below the tree,

pointing to the presence of a life-giving spring.

One day I stopped under this tree for a rest on the way out to one of my hunting grounds. I unwrapped my *bashlyk*,* had something to eat, and then just sat leaning against the tree.

Sleep crept on me unawares. It's easy enough to doze off in cool shade after a tiring walk.

God only knows how long I slept, but when I opened my eyes the sun was dipping towards the mountains. I stretched out my hand for the gun but it wasn't there. I looked around—it was gone. There were no people to be seen either. If it was a robber, I reflected, why had he left me alive and not even tried to take my money? And if not, what could have happened to the gun?

No sooner had that thought crossed my mind than I heard a heavy tread behind me. I turned round, and cold sweat stood on my brow. An enormous bear was coming towards me! Woe to me, I thought, if I had my flint-lock I could smash its head, but what can I do with a dagger alone? I wrapped my left

**Bashlyk*—a cloth hood with long ends used as a scarf.

hand in the tail of my *boorka*,* put it out like a shield and waited.

The cursed beast was coming on so fearlessly one might have thought I wasn't there. I was numb with fright. This is the end of me, I thought.

I thought of climbing the tree, but remembered that bears are far better hands at that sport than myself. At that desperate moment I noticed that the bear had a lame right hind leg. My heart danced with joy.

"Mokhnatka, my pet, my own lame darling," I shouted and stretching out my arms ran towards her and hugged her head.

Mokhnatka grunted gladly and licked me in the face as in days gone by. Then she looked at me so sadly, so forlornly, as if she had just buried a child.

"Why are you so sad, my darling?" I asked her. "Why are you alone? Did I send you to your folk to have you unhappy? Where is your husband? Where are your little ones?"

She listened to me with drooping head, like a bereft widow, sighing softly. Then she walked aside, looked under a big stone and

* *Boorka*—a sleeveless felt coat.

came back on her hind legs carrying my gun in her arms.

"Now, can you imagine that!" I thought. "What did she hide my gun for? Miraculous are thy deeds, oh Almighty Lord. Just imagine—she knows that a gun sends death and feared lest I killed her offhand before I was properly awake and recognized her."

Yes, Mokhnatka knew all that.... I made to take the gun but she would not give it to me. Instead she turned and walked uphill, towards some rocks. She went a few steps, then stopped and looked back at me, made another few steps and looked back at me again and then at the rock in front as though to say that there was something there and that I was to follow her.

I walked after her bewildered, my legs feeling wooden under me as if they weren't my own. I wondered whether I was bewitched or dealing with the devil himself or whether it was the will of the Prophet that a bear should take my gun and I should follow it empty-handed. I knew that there was a steep cliff on the other side of the hill. Reaching the top Mokhnatka lay flat on her belly and crawled towards the edge of the cliff. She peered cautiously down, then crawled back, handed me the gun and

looked now at me, now to the edge of the cliff.

Following her bidding, I called on Allah, and moved forward on all fours. When I was near the edge I lay flat and looked back. Mokhnatka followed me and pressed herself to the ground at my feet.

I bent over the edge. The face of the rock was as steep as a wall. There was a cave at the foot of it. The sight that met my eye made my heart well nigh jump out of my breast. A gigantic cat, the size of a cow, slept sprawling at the entrance of the cave. Sheaves of rays from the setting sun falling on its orange and black striped coat made it glint and sparkle like the silk garments of the shah himself. I had never seen such a beast before—only heard about them from my father. It was sleeping peacefully, now and then chasing tiresome flies away, as a cat does.

When the fit of trembling that overcame me had subsided and I was again able to think coolly, I picked up my gun and steadied it on the rock. But to aim it was devilishly difficult, because the wall slanted inwards and the tiger was lying at the very entrance into the cave. I could only sight its head by leaning out over the precipice at the risk of tumbling down headlong.

At last I summoned up my courage, leaned out, aimed and pressed the trigger. The roar of the shot echoed through the gorge, and the smoke hid the tiger from view. Mokhnatka jumped up and raced off. At the foot of the hill there was a hollow in the ground washed out by the heavy rains. She hid in the hollow under the dog-rose and bramble bushes. I jumped in after her. A few minutes passed without a sign of the tiger; we crept out from our place of concealment and climbed the rock again, looking around cautiously. I peeped warily over the edge and sighed with relief—the tiger was still sprawled out—the bullet must've hit it exactly where I had wanted, in the head.

When Mokhnatka had made sure that the tiger was dead, the sadness in her eyes was allayed a little as though a healing lotion had been applied to her wounded heart. She licked my hands, grunted, and went down.

It took us some time to get round to the other side of the hill, but finally we found ourselves at the entrance of the cave. In my exultation I sang and shouted loud enough to be heard all down the gorge. This was a cause for joy indeed! There had been only one other tiger killed in our region before and that was

by the famous Armenian hunter Akop. It had happened twenty years before, when I was a mere child. They had sent the skin to the *kaimakam** that time, to soften his heart towards us. As I skinned the tiger, I thought that I'd present the skin to Yusuf-bek—perhaps, he would then forgive Mokhnatka and would even give me something in return.

Then this idea was driven out of my mind by another one, quite different. To hell with beks and sultans! I knew what I'd do—I'd marry Match, Slo's daughter, and present the skin to my Match, my beloved who was as beautiful as a gazelle, and for whose sake I later killed a man and had to flee to Russia.

"I'll tell Match tonight that for love of her I braved a ferocious tiger and her heart may warm up towards me, and Slo, her father, will praise me for my courage. The whole village will sing the bravery of Davot the shepherd, and Match will become my betrothed."

The thought made me so happy that my heart began to beat faster and my face flushed hot. I burst into my favourite song that I had made up in honour of Match, and all the gorges around joined in it.

* *Kaimakam*—the administrative head of a district.

I went on skinning the tiger, overwhelmed with joy, when I suddenly heard a low groan. I glanced towards Mokhnatka, and a shiver ran down my spine—it was as though a jug of cold water had been poured on a flaming fire.

I felt as if my heart had been pierced by a bullet. Freshly chewn bones, were scattered about the cave—two little heads, thin legs resembling a sheep's ribs, small hairy paws. Mokhnatka was gathering them in a heap and whining woefully. Only now did I understand what a terrible misfortune had befallen poor Mokhnatka. The tiger had devoured her cubs and so, unable to deal with him herself, she had chosen me as the weapon of her revenge.

Petrified with pity, I watched the movements of the bereft mother. She collected the bones, hunched over them and with dull whines and sorrowful sighs began to sniff and lick the remains of her cubs. Even now I can hear the sad dirge that her heart sang over her dead children. When I finished skinning the tiger and loaded the skin onto my back, Mokhnatka seemed to have woken up; she sighed dismally, and rose too. She scraped some earth together and buried the

little bones under it, heaping some dry leaves, twigs, and stones over the grave.

By sunset we reached the hill on the outskirts of our village. From there we could hear the barking of dogs. Mokhnatka stopped. I bent down, kissed her on the forehead and the eyes, and, a stony-hearted hunter though I am, sobbed like a child, mourning our parting, mourning Mokhnatka's children and her boundless grief.

Wiping my eyes dry, I went on towards the village.

The sun was setting. Mokhnatka stood on the hill, silhouetted against the red sky, and followed me with her eyes. When I entered the village, she turned and shambled off—back towards the Tigris gorge, towards the grave of her little ones.

I never met her again.

Fifty springs and fifty autumns have passed since those days. I've grown old, my hair has turned white, the events of later years have become dim in the fog of my memory, and only two images still make the heart of the old hunter throb—one is that of a girl, slender like a gazelle, and the other is of a woe-stricken she-bear, hunched over the grave of her cubs.

THE TRAITOR

ON A COLD winter day we stopped for a rest at a mountain hamlet near the Persian border. We thought we would spend the night there and go to hunt moufflons the next morning. We stayed at the house of a tall long man with a crooked face, pale and sad, one side of which was wrapped in a towel.

I was sitting Eastern fashion in front of a blazing fire-place and holding forth in my favourite strain—on hunting and hunters.

"I was a hunter, too, once," our host said with a sigh. "But I've given it up. It's a dishonest business."

"Can one really give up hunting?" my companion asked.

The man sighed again.

"A monster-snake put an end to my hunting."

"That sounds interesting," I thought.

Yielding to our insistence, our taciturn host at last thawed up and told us the following story, sitting by the fire and leisurely smoking his narghile.

"There was a time," he began, "when my face was not crooked and I did not hide it from people's eyes as I do now, and when I wasn't so sad and wasted. I was like you, young and handsome, and I went hunting, with my gun over my shoulder, on the slopes of the Great Masis ridge. Hunting was the one joy of my cheerless life, but it was that same hunting that caused my face to be so frightfully disfigured."

Our host, Long Suleiman, unwound the towel that wrapped his face.

Our hair stood on end. He had no right cheek at all. Between the forehead and the lower jaw there was a big hole, with ghastly white bones sticking out, and in place of an eye was a horrid black cavity. You would have thought that the right side of this man's head had been dead for some twenty years, and the flesh had rotted away from the bones, while the left side, though still alive, was terrified by the proximity of death, and bore an expression of constant horror.

The story promised to be a mysterious one and I was burning with curiosity.

"Now I shall tell you how this happened and why Nature punished me so cruelly," Suleiman said wrapping his head up again.

One autumn I was running, gun in hand, across the dry grass at the foot of the Masis, trying to intercept a fox. I kept my eyes glued on the fox, paying no attention to where I trod. The next thing I knew, I was lying at the bottom of a deep narrow hole, very much like a well. High above me, through the bushes overhanging the opening, I could see a bit of blue sky.

However hard I tried, I could not get out. The walls were of smooth slippery rock and there was nothing to catch at or to support one's foot on. In complete despair I sat down on a stone and thought how silly it was to die like that.

Suddenly I noticed two eyes gleaming in the corner. I looked closer and went cold all over. A huge snake lay coiled there and stared fixedly at me.

So there I sat, numb with horror, face to

face with a snake. We just stared at each other, neither of us daring to move.

I wondered whether I should try shooting at it. But what if I did not kill it at once but only wounded it? What would become of me then?

The snake's eyes, which had flashed with hostility at first, softened gradually. It stretched out its big flat head and moved forward, without taking its eyes off me.

"It's going to make a meal of me, now," I thought. Fear gripped my heart. I wanted to pick up my gun, but my arm would not obey me. Meanwhile the snake crawled up to me slowly, coiled up, and raised its head gazing right into my eyes.

I was shivering all over. True enough, it did not seem to have any hostile intentions, but you never know with a snake. It isn't a creature to be trifled with—one must have a heart of steel to be able to look a snake in the eyes.

I sat motionless and the snake did not stir either. This seemed to last an eternity.

After a while it put its head on my lap. The creature must have liked the warmth of my body, for little by little, coil after coil, it arranged its whole body in my lap. Realizing

that this was a chance to make myself agreeable to it, I covered it with the skirt of my coat and it fell asleep, warm and snug.

Now it was my turn to shiver with cold. It's no joke to feel the cold of a snake's body.

By and by I calmed down, however. I remembered the ways of all snakes—if you do no harm to them and are good to them they won't harm you either and will be your friends. This snake was obviously an old and experienced one, and seeing the state I was in must have decided to let me be.

"Goodness," I said to myself, "it looks as if almighty Nature has decided to give me a snake for a comrade in my plight. Well, I should be pleased with whatever I get. Let's see how things will shape."

The light falling from above began to grow dim. Soon it was pitch dark in my hole.

The snake slept tranquilly and its chill pierced me to the bone. That night seemed a year to me.

In the morning, the snake awoke, stretched out its head and again gazed into my eyes for a long time. Finally it opened its huge mouth, and began to lick my hands with its rough, knotty tongue.

I mustered courage and stroked its head

and neck though the touch of its cold, slippery skin made me shudder with repulsion. My caresses probably thawed the snake's heart, for it now looked at me with such friendly and gentle eyes that all my fears melted.

Finally the snake left my side, and crawling off into a farthest corner started licking a white stone. I don't know what sort of a rock that was, but the snake licked it often on the following days too.

At midday, when the autumn sun is the warmest, the snake stood on its tail and slipping up the wall looked out of the hole. Only then did I realize how monstrously long it was. It caught at some bushes over the hole and pulled itself out.

I rose and made several more attempts to get out. But I only exhausted myself in vain and, overcome by despair, I sat back in the corner on the brink of tears.

"A pretty fix I'm in," I thought. "Can there be a sillier death?" I remembered my children and my heart ached.

Some time later I heard a rustling overhead and saw the snake put its head into the hole, a hare in its mouth. It caught at a bush with its tail and lowered itself down.

And then—Allah strike me dead if I'm lying

—it put the hare before me and kept glancing from the hare to me and back. I did not dare to touch the hare for fear the snake might take offence and show me who was the master there. But no!—it did not even come near the hare but just looked now at it, now at me, as if trying to make me understand something.

Finally I ventured to reach for the hare. The snake did not move. There were plenty of dry leaves and twigs on the floor of the hole. I gathered a heap of them and wanted to make a fire but I gave up the idea, not knowing what view my host would take of this liberty.

In the evening the snake crawled over to me again, laid several coils of its body in my lap, winding the rest around my feet, and fell asleep. Even in hot weather, the nights are cold in the Ararat valley, and I knew that I was doing this cold-blooded animal a great service by warming it during the night. On the other hand I could not help recalling a popular saying: "If you keep a snake, expect trouble," and the thought of the trouble it might bring me made my flesh creep.

The next day the snake went out again to bask in the sun and procure some food, leaving the hare behind. My flint and steel were

on me, and so I lit a fire, skinned the hare, salted it, and roasted a bit. I had no proper wood, however, and the twigs and leaves made but a poor fire—so the hare was terribly underdone. But a hungry hunter can even eat raw meat if hard pressed. The hare turned out to be very tender, and I finished a good deal of it off in no time.

Immediately afterwards I was sorry I ate it at all. I was consumed with such a terrific thirst I nearly went out of my mind.

By the evening the snake returned home, bringing nothing this time. I had half of the hare, its entrails, skin, head, and legs hidden away, but when the snake came back I thought I'd ingratiate myself with it and offered it the remaining half of the hare's meat. It swallowed the meat at one gulp. Then I put before the snake the hare's head, legs, and entrails that I wrapped into the skin. It swallowed all this up too, not like a wolf or a dog does—in one gulp, but sucking it in slowly, though hungrily.

After that we became even better friends. The snake again started licking the white rock in the corner, glancing at me every now and again, as if inviting me to do likewise.

I came over, picked up the stone and licked

its sides, which the snake's poisonous tongue had not touched. Thirst was torturing me so much that I was ready to try anything. I had heard that people travelling in the deserts of Persia put a round pebble into their mouths and suck it. It helps to gather saliva and relieve the thirst.

I licked the stone and was surprised to feel the thirst abating. The rock was quite tasteless, but it did quench thirst—whether because it helped collect the saliva or because it had some magic force, I don't know.

In this way I spent another two days. By the end of that time I was so weak with hunger and thirst that I could hardly stand.

One morning my host wound itself around me and I found myself locked within its coils.

The snake found this a very comfortable position since in this way I warmed up the whole length of its body. Suddenly there was a flutter of wings above, and a partridge pursued by a falcon dropped into our hole and sat down, stupefied, in the corner. When it noticed us it made to fly away but the masterful gaze of the snake rooted it to the spot.

I knew the power of a snake's gaze and was sure that the bird was as good as in the bag.

The snake stared into its eyes, and the partridge, paralyzed, began to tremble all over. Keeping its eyes fixed on its quarry, the snake calmly glided towards it, seized the poor bird by the neck and brought it to me.

I tore off two pieces of meat and threw the rest into the snake's mouth. It swallowed the bird whole, feathers and all, while I salted the raw meat, ate it and started licking the stone.

The thirst became so excruciating that I lost my head and started groaning, and scratching on the wall, and wildly trying to jump out only to fall down again. The snake regarded me with astonishment. I believe it finally understood that I wanted to get out for it slipped out of the hole, caught at a bush, and lowered the tail down.

I watched it in amazement, unable to fathom the meaning of what it did.

After remaining in that position for a fairly long time, it pulled up its tail, lowered its head, and looked at me questioningly. Then it resumed its former position. Its tail hung over my head like an elephant's trunk.

I knew how strong some snakes are and was confident that it could pull me up if I caught at

the tail; on the other hand I was afraid I might hurt it and make it angry—and then. . . .

"But what does it matter?" I thought. "I can't possibly be worse off than I am." I caught at the snake's tail, the snake strained and its tail became as hard as a piece of iron, and thus it pulled me out of the hole.

When I saw the sunlight again, after being in that hell for so long, when I gazed at my beloved fields, the rippling waters of the Araz, the smoke curling over our village, I felt as if I had been born anew, and was as happy as a child.

I hugged my saviour by the neck and started whimpering. My head was swimming, I was ready to faint, and my legs could scarcely hold me. I staggered forward and the snake slid after me, rustling in the grass, its head high in the air.

On the way we saw a hare. I fired. The snake jumped and its eyes blazed fiercely. But it was reassured seeing me pick up the hare and place it before it. The snake swallowed the hare whole, and I saw it move slowly inside the snake, bulging out its body.

So, in friendly accord, we reached our village. Dusk was falling. Cows mooed, coming back from the pasture, smoke stood over the

roofs, dogs barked. The snake would not go any farther and stayed behind. On entering the village I looked back. The snake lay in the dry grass and followed me with its eyes.

My wife and children greeted me with loud wailing. The poor things had abandoned all hope of ever seeing me again. Everybody thought the Kurds must have captured me at Masis and murdered me.

After they heard my story, the people in the village took a kinder view of snakes.

A year passed.

It was a hot summer day. The dogs, their tongues hanging out, hid in sheds, the chickens sought shelter in shaded corners, the buffaloes lay up to their necks in mud-pools.

Suddenly I heard sounds of clamour. I looked and saw all our people, old and young alike, pour out into the street and follow four strangers dressed like dervishes. One of them was blowing a pipe, another was beating a tambourine, and two others lugged along some motley-coloured chests and an iron cage full of snakes.

On reaching the village square they put down their load, opened the chests and the cage, and spreading out a carpet emptied the cage onto it. The women shouted, and the

children squealed with delight, watching dozens of snakes crawling over one another on the carpet.

You should have seen all those snakes! There was the bedrang, coloured like a piece of rock; the gurza, with a huge flat head and an enormous body; the coal-black broad-mouthed adder; the iridescent shakhmar; the hairy horned snake, and many others.

The dervishes piped and beat the tambourine, and the snakes rose on their tails and made comic swaying motions as if they were dancing.

Another dervish was demonstrating his fearlessness. He would take the most poisonous of the snakes—an adder—and lay it against his chest. The snake would slide over the dervish's body, getting under his shirt, disappearing in his pants and then suddenly popping out of a hole in the clothing or his open collar.

Then he picked up another snake and placed its head in his mouth. The women screamed, making the dervish smile complacently and stroke his beard. One of the peasants said:

"There's nothing in all this. They've pulled out its teeth, it isn't poisonous any longer. Even my old grandad would think nothing of putting such a snake in his mouth."

"He wouldn't? Well then, bring a chicken here, if you think it isn't poisonous," said the dervish.

The man did not dare to go back on his word. He fetched a cock and placed it before the snake.

The snake stretched out its neck with a menacing look. Its eyes glowing red, it hissed, and darting forward bit the cock on the comb. A tiny drop of blood rolled down, and there was just a speck of a scratch to be seen on the comb. But the poison was so strong that the cock swelled up and died before our very eyes.

"Bury it deep so that the dogs cannot get at it," the dervish told us, collecting the snakes. Then he addressed the crowd:

"Well, folks, is there anyone who is pestered by snakes in the house? We'll rid you of them in no time."

"Why, they're no trouble. A snake is our benefactor," said one of the old men.

"Since when has the snake that seduced Eve become man's friend?" asked the dervish in a mocking voice.

"Since our neighbour Long Suleiman's life was saved by a snake," said my friend Askyar.

"Oh, you've snakes as clever as that?"

They told the dervish my story in detail, and

his eyes lit up greedily as if he were a cat who'd seen a piece of sheep liver.

"Suleiman, my friend," he said, "give me that snake. I'll take it to Tiflis and Baku and people will marvel at it."

"It isn't an honest thing to do, dervish," I answered, "and I will never agree to it."

"Suleiman, my friend, Allah witness, what's dishonest about it? I shall keep it in silk and velvet, and feed it on sweet delicacies. Living in these wild bushes, it's always cold and hungry, while with me it'll be warm and comfortable. Just show us the place, Suleiman. We'll get it ourselves. I'll give you ten tumans for it."

"Dervish, you're a man of the Prophet, you go about preaching mercy, and yet here you are forcing me to an evil deed!" I answered, thinking to myself the while: "Now, my boy, you can buy an ox for ten tumans."

"I'll ask the Prophet to absolve your sin, Suleiman—just show me the place."

The dervish spread out a rug, kneeled, and, turning his face to the East, bowed, raised his arms, and started muttering.

Thus encouraged, I agreed to sell my friend and saviour for fifteen tumans, despicable creature that I was.

The dervishes were overjoyed and we all started for the hole that was the home of my snake.

The nearer we came to the place, the more my conscience troubled me. This cursed poverty—the things it does to a man—makes him a thief, a murderer, or a traitor.

“Never mind,” I tried to reassure myself. “It’s only a dumb creature after all. What can it understand about betrayals. It isn’t as if it were a man, for me to be ashamed to look it in the eyes.”

Finally we reached the hole. I stood to the side. The snake was at home.

One of the dervishes lowered a Persian silk carpet into the hole, which sparkled and blazed with thousands of colours in the sun. The snake stared at the carpet spellbound, while I peeped out of the bushes, my heart wrung painfully as if the shah were taking my own brother in his army.

The dervish started singing a lulling Arab song in a thin sweet voice, beating the rhythm lightly on a tambourine and shaking it to make the bells tinkle.

The snake raised its head above its coils and stared with astonishment, but I could see that the music had a soothing effect on it.

The dervish took some bright object out of his pocket, showed it to the snake and began to play a sweet tune on the pipe.

Oh, music! Music can drive anyone crazy—the greatest beauty in the world, a bloodthirsty wolf, or a fierce snake.

Yielding to the music, the snake slipped up the motley-coloured carpet and lay its head in the lap of the playing dervish.

And so the snake was tricked and lured into a cage. I went a little distance away so as not to see what was going on. I had done a base deed and was ashamed of myself.

As soon as the snake was safely in the cage and the lid snapped down behind it, the dervish came up to me and handed me the promised sum of money, saying, "I hope you'll make good use of it, Suleiman, my friend—you've given me a great treasure."

The money burned my palm like red-hot coals.

The cage had a handle on each side. Two dervishes picked it up and carried their prey joyfully. As they were passing me, the snake suddenly lifted its head, threw me a spiteful glance, hissed and struck its body against the iron bars as if trying to break free.

It recognized me, the brute, it did! It under-

stood I had betrayed it. And as I stood there rooted to the spot like that partridge, unable to move a limb, the snake shot me another ferocious glance, pressed its head to the bars, and spat some strange sort of yellowish-green saliva into my face—in a little sore I had on my right cheek.

It was as if it wished to say: "You vile dog! Did I care for you, look after you, take you out of hell into the light of day, did I save your life to have you sell me for fifteen tumans? I spit on your treacherous heart, you nasty little man!"

I howled with horror and dropped in a dead faint. I don't remember what happened afterwards.

For months after this I was half crazy—day and night the snake stood before my eyes.

Its saliva contained venom that it had sucked out of its teeth. Getting into the sore on my face the venom burned it and ate into it and in the end my cheek began to rot and the flesh fell away in shreds. That's how I came to be what I am now.

Long Suleiman drew at his narghile, stirred the coals in the fire, and said with a sigh:

"Yes, that is my story, brother hunters."

INSCRIPTION ON THE GRAVE

IN ONE of the gorges of the Asli mountain range, in the Ved region that borders with Persia, a big flat stone lies on the bank of a stream.

Many years ago somebody engraved an inscription on this stone, and it is clearly visible to this day. Time has not effaced it and apparently never will.

People in the neighbouring mountain villages will tell you a legend connected with this stone. They say a man lies buried under it whose name nobody remembers any longer. In his time, however, he was a celebrated hunter. No bird or beast ever escaped him. All the same, he knew no rest, because of his insatiable greed.

"I'm not content with killing goats," he once said to his wife. "I want to catch them alive."

So he went into the mountains, shot a huge

he-goat with enormous horns, and skinned him. He then got into the goat's skin and none could now tell him from a goat.

So disguised, he began stealing up to a herd of goats.

It was a foggy day, and he was already quite close to the goats, who did not discover his ruse. Another minute and he would have mixed with the herd and started his treacherous work.

At that time another hunter happened to be wandering, gun in hand, in the Asli Mountains. He caught sight of the big goat and was overjoyed at the chance of killing such a giant.

"He's so big, though," the hunter thought, "one bullet will not be enough for him."

He loaded his gun with two big bullets and fired.

A wild howl rent the air. The hunter rushed to his catch—and found a dying man.

"What have you done?" the hunter cried, appalled. "Why did you make me commit a sin?"

The man in the goat's skin told him about his plan and died.

So he was buried by the stream and the hunter who had killed him engraved an inscription on the tombstone:

“He who changeth his skin, shall receive two bullets in the heart.”

The stone still lies on the bank of the stream and every time I go to hunt in the gorge I re-read the inscription on it.

TO THE READER

The Foreign Languages Publishing House would be glad to have your opinion of this book and its design and any suggestions you may have for future publications.

Please send them to 21, Zubovsky Boulevard, Moscow, U.S.S.R.

